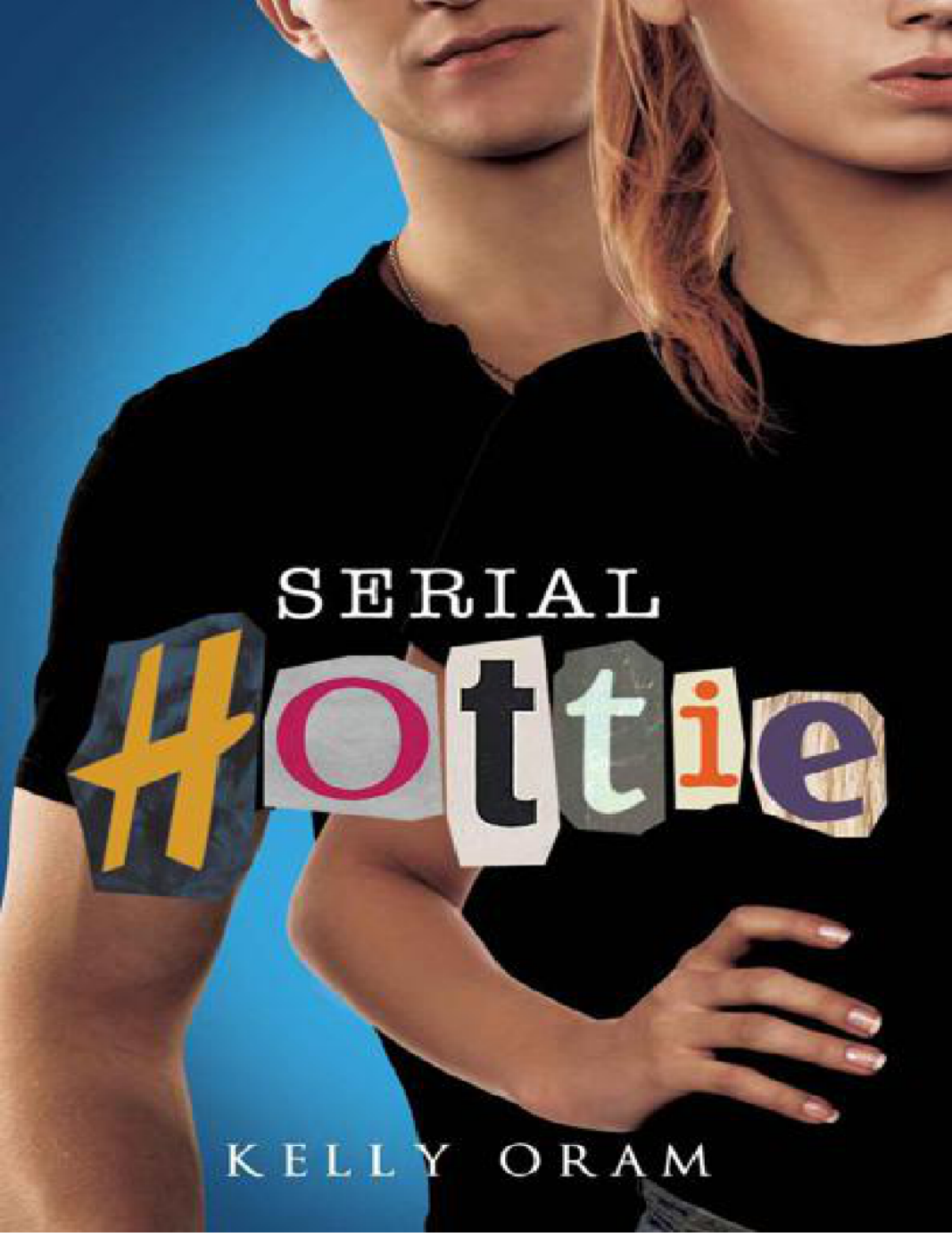
SERIAL
Hottie
KELLY ORAM

SERIAL Hottie

by
Kelly Oram

Published by Bluefields Creative

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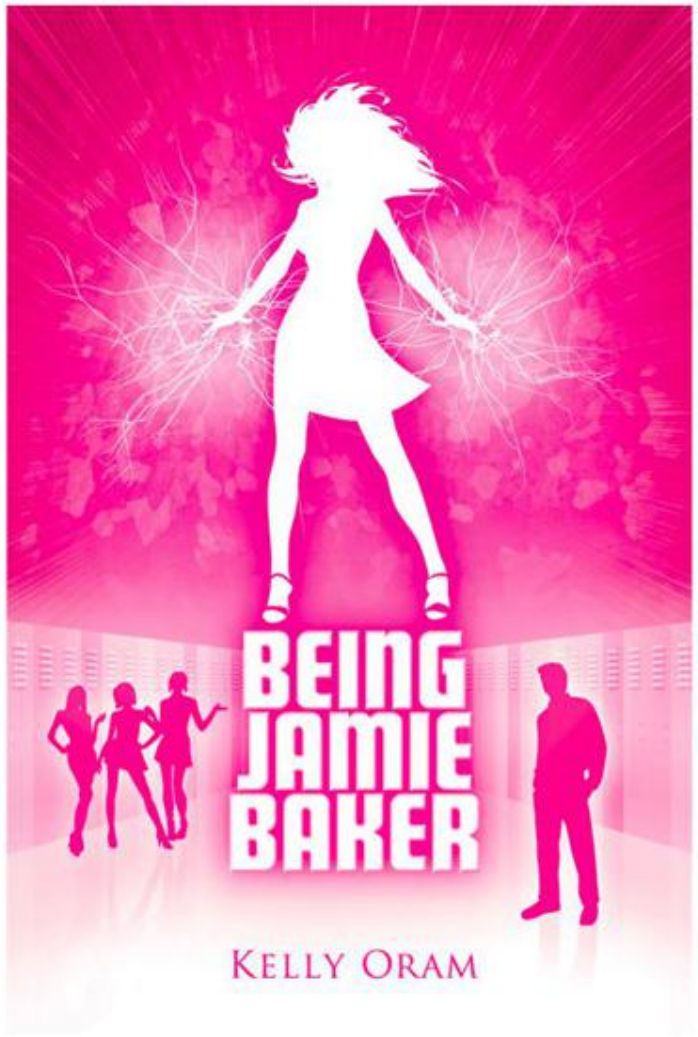

“Most superhero stories start with a meteor shower or a nasty insect bite, but mine actually starts with a kiss.”

www.beingjamiebaker.com

...

For Christy Ann

Not because we used to stalk our hot neighbor or anything...

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BONUS MATERIAL

“HOUSE HUNTING” (Seth’s first glimpse of Ellie)

CHAPTER 1 FROM SETH’S POV

COMING NEXT FROM KELLY ORAM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This was going to be the longest summer of my life. Being deprived of my three best friends, Jesse, Josh, and Jack—otherwise known as the J's—was worse than I'd imagined it would be. It'd only been a week and I was already cracking like a nut job from the summer boredom. If it weren't for the new kid across the street I'd be in a room with padded walls already.

The new kid and his mom moved in the day after the J's left to go to hockey camp for the summer. I'm not even going to start on how unfair it is that I couldn't go with them just because of the fact that I'm a stupid girl—a fact which my older sister says is debatable—because it will only make me punch something.

Anyway, the J's all left to go become NHL material, and just when I thought for sure I was going to literally die without them, a moving van pulled up in front of the house across the street. Naturally I was curious, so I sat up in my room, with a bowl of ice cream and Weezer blaring loudly through my open window, and watched as the movers began hauling stuff into the house.

After a few minutes, I stuck the spoon in my mouth and forgot to remove it until I got a massive brain freeze. This was not because I'm a moron and don't know how to eat ice cream. It was because a BMW, of all things, pulled up to the curb in front of the house.

Of course I've seen nice cars before, and it wasn't even about the fact that I live in the kind of neighborhood where people only drive minivans, but a BMW? That's like German or something. If you're going to move to Detroit—okay well Canton, which is only a suburb of Detroit, but still—the least you could do is have the decency to drive American.

I waited to see what kind of people would have the nerve to roll up in a foreign car, and the woman who stepped out from behind the wheel seemed to perfectly fit the stereotype I had in my head. She was super skinny, which, not to be rude to a lot of the moms on my street, was not something we were used to seeing around here. She had really shiny brunette hair, like the kind you see on shampoo commercials. Her clothes were probably designer, not that I would really know, and she had something hanging on her ear, which I

decided was one of those cell phone things you see people using in the movies. In fact, she looked like someone you would see in the movies.

Then *he* stepped out of the car and I felt like I'd died and gone to *The OC*. He had shaggy, dark brown hair that was as messy as the guys' that play hockey with me, except that his seemed to be styled like that on purpose. It hung down into his eyes, making him look kind of mysterious, and he was really tall. Definitely varsity basketball team tall—not that he struck me as the type to play organized sports. And tall is good, because I'm like five, ten.

Not that I'm planning our wedding or anything, I'm just saying.

He seemed a little on the skinny side, but you could see the definition under his polo-fit tee. It gave him the appearance of an Abercrombie & Fitch model, officially making him the hottest boy I've ever seen. So hot, that I could feel myself blushing even though he was down on the street and had no idea I was watching him.

And that's what I did for the rest of the week. I watched him.

I'd become obsessive about spying on him over the last week since it was my only form of entertainment. Well, it was the most exciting entertainment anyway. I did have my X-box to keep me company, but even *Grand Theft Auto* couldn't compare with Mr. Abercrombie working out in his garage.

The workouts started the morning after he moved in. Every morning around nine a.m. he worked himself ragged. Half the days he did an extensive cardio workout, with a jump rope of all things, and then he'd beat the crap out of a punching bag. That's pretty fun to watch, but I'll admit I liked the days when he lifted better. He had one of those weight machines that allows you to work out all the different parts of your body, so after he worked his thighs and gluts, he moved on to my particular favorite, his upper body.

I kind of have the perfect view, too. My bedroom window is directly across from his bedroom window, which sits above his garage. So after his workout, I can usually catch a glimpse of him stripping his tank top off as he heads into his bathroom to shower. Best ten seconds of my day. Only today it was actually more like a whole minute, because he stopped to look out his window as he gulped down a bottle of water.

I was completely mesmerized by his hotness, and didn't think to hide from his view until our eyes locked. I panicked and quickly ducked out of sight hoping that we were far enough away from each other, that maybe he didn't notice me. Maybe I only thought he'd seen me.

I waited a minute and then peeked again to see if he was gone, but he was still standing there. Not only that, but it's like he was waiting for me—like he knew I'd look again. At that point what could I do,

hide again? I think not. I was already busted.

In an attempt to save my dignity, and hopefully make him think I'd just happened to notice him and wasn't actually *watching* him, I threw my hand up and waved. He didn't wave back, but beneath the intense stare he was giving me, the corners of his mouth curved into half a smile. I couldn't help but think, *Is he laughing at me?*

"Who are you waving at?" a shrill voice called out from behind me.

Angela. The dreaded older sister. Just the name makes me shudder. She's only a year older than me, but that's enough to make her think she's better than me in every way possible. I hate her because she's way pretty and wears a lot of skirts and stuff, and she hates me because I'm basically the opposite—a pale, skinny, redhead, who's taller than half the boys in school and could beat any one of them in hockey.

Angela barged into my room so suddenly that I jumped sky high at the sound of her voice. "What?" I yelped as I whirled around to face her.

"Why are you blushing?" she demanded the moment she saw my face.

"I'm not blushing. I'm just… It's hot in here. What do you want?"

She watched me suspiciously for a moment and then put the pieces together. "Oh, my gosh!" she shrieked. "You were watching the new guy work out, weren't you?" She pushed me out of the way to take her own peek at the window across the street, which was now empty, and added, "Did I miss him take his shirt off already?"

Good to know stalking runs in the family. I was going to deny it and play dumb, but I was still so stunned by him catching me that I blurted out a "yup" before I could stop myself.

Angela sighed in regret, but then pulled herself away form my window and turned her evil eyes on me. "Well, well, well, is Ellie Westley finally crushing on a boy? It's about time."

"What? I don't—"

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, Ellie." Angela rolled her eyes as she cut me off. "He's totally gorgeous and you're almost sixteen. I was starting to worry that you'd never realize what boys are for."

I'd already had enough embarrassment for one day with the whole being caught spying thing. I didn't need Angela making it worse with some sort of welcome to womanhood speech.

"What are you doing in my room?" I yelled.

"Sheesh, I was just looking for my black clips."

"Do I look like someone who would use your hair clips?"

"You should. You actually have really nice hair if you would just brush it once in a while."

I couldn't help reaching up to grab my ponytail defensively. "I brush

it."

When Angela saw the frown on my face, she studied me for a moment then sighed. "I can't believe I'm about to say this but, why don't we go shopping today and get you a skirt and a swimsuit and you can come with me to the lake tomorrow."

"Excuse me?" Never in all my fifteen years and eleven months of existence had such a statement come out of Angela's mouth.

"Listen. I know you miss those loser friends of yours, but maybe them being gone is a good thing." I was shocked because she actually sounded sincere. Well, sincere for her anyway. "If you'll promise to not be quite so… *you*." There goes the sincerity. "I'll let you hang out with my friends and me. With the J's out of the way, we might have a decent chance of turning you into a girl this summer."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Had Angela gone mental? Was I not the only one going crazy from the summer break? Well Hell would have to freeze over before I agreed to a make-over, and considering it was like a hundred degrees outside, I pushed Angela into the hallway and slammed my bedroom door screaming, "I don't have your stupid clips!"

"Freak!" Angela yelled back through the door. I guess she was mad that I wouldn't let her play like I'm her Barbie.

Well, whatever! Just because my best friends were all boys, and I liked to play hockey, and I'd never been kissed before, didn't mean I wasn't a girl. And for the record, I didn't have a crush on the new guy. I just thought he was really hot. But even if I did, it wouldn't have been my first. I'd had crushes on boys before. Not any of the J's of course, but last year I totally liked my biology partner Eric Sherman. That didn't work out so much since we dissected frogs and I mentioned I was disappointed that there wasn't any blood. But still.

Feeling ready to punch something, which is basically how I feel every time I have to interact with Angela, I cranked up the My Chemical Romance and climbed out my bedroom window onto the roof of the garage where I like to go when I need space. I assumed that's where I'd spend the rest of my day because my life was just that exciting.

I actually didn't stay out on the roof that long, because Mrs. Haskins pulled up in front of my house. "Ellie, honey," she called to me through the open passenger window, "are you free to watch Cameron this evening?"

"Sure Mrs. Haskins. What time do you need me?"

"Six o'clock okay?"

"Should be fine."

"Thanks Ellie!" She started to drive off, but then stopped again.

“Oh, and Ellie?”

“Yeah, Mrs. H?”

“If you see Bruno, would you mind hanging on to him till I can come get him?”

“He got out?” I couldn’t help the surprise in my voice. It’s not like Bruno is a little Chihuahua who could sneak through a hole he dug under the fence. He’s a 70-pound boxer. He’d never hurt a fly, but still not the kind of dog you’d want cruising the neighborhood on his own.

“Bob forgot to shut the gate after he took the trash to the curb this morning.”

I laughed because that was just like Mr. Haskins. That man would forget his shoes in the morning if Mrs. Haskins weren’t there. “You want me to help you look for him?”

Mrs. Haskin’s eyes lit up at the offer. “Oh, would you?”

“Sure. Let me just put on my skates and I’ll do a few laps through the greenbelt for you.”

“Oh, Ellie.” Mrs. Haskins sighed in relief. “What would I ever do without you?”

More like what would I do without the Haskins? I’m saving up to by a car as soon as I get my drivers license, and the Haskins’ add to my car fund more than any other family in the neighborhood. They pay really well and only have one kid—a baby who’ll be in bed by seven-thirty. Plus, they always have the cupboards stocked, and they get all the movie channels. It’s almost a crime to take their money. “See you in a while Mrs. Haskins,” I called with a big friendly grin.

Not that looking for Bruno was all that exciting, but I was more than happy to slip on my rollerblades and go for a good skate. I’d been in the house too much this week and could use the exercise. So, as Mrs. Haskins continued to drive down the street calling out for her dog, I headed in the other direction toward the greenbelt like I’d promised.

I live in a subdivision called Brookhurst. I don’t mean one of those new “housing developments” where you have to put a potted plant or a flag by the mailbox just so that you can tell which house is yours. I’m talking about a real neighborhood. The kind of place where there may be a house here and there in need of a paint job, but the trees are mature enough that they actually produce shade. Real estate people like to use the term ‘character’.

It’s the type of place where everybody knows everybody, and for some reason once you move in you stay until you croak. Which is exactly why the new guy moving in was so exciting, and also why I couldn’t stop thinking about him as I rolled around the neighborhood.

I went down every path in the entire neighborhood but didn’t see any trace of Bruno. Since Michigan is hot and muggy enough to be

mistaken for a rainforest in the summer, I only did one lap and then called it quits. I got to my driveway and ripped off my helmet to wipe at the sweat that had gathered under it.

No sooner did I toss the helmet in the grass than I heard the sound of paws thudding toward me. Not only does Bruno love me because I feed him junk sometimes while I'm babysitting, but he seemed particularly excited at the moment because of his current freedom. He came barreling at me at full speed.

"Bruno, no! Stay! Bad dog!" I called when I realized he wasn't going to stop. But it was too late. Bruno jumped up and knocked me right off my skates.

Everything happened so fast. I crashed back against my driveway *hard*, and for a second, things went totally black. When I came to my ears were ringing, my head was pounding, and I felt like I was going to vomit at any moment.

Then, just as I'd suspected would happen, a giant tongue attacked my face.

Bruno only got the chance to give me one good lick before he yelped and fell limp beside me. That's when I looked up to see the new guy staring down at me with the most intense eyes I'd ever seen. And, get this. He was holding a Taser. "Hi, Ellie," he said in a strong, deep voice. "It's nice to meet you."

Well of course I screamed. The psycho just killed the Haskins' dog. I screamed loud enough that the J's probably heard me all the way at camp. Then I tried my best to push the new kid away from me, but he was too strong. I would have freaked out that such a hot boy was touching me, except I was too busy freaking out that such a hot boy was touching me! Pinning me to the ground, actually.

"Easy there, Ellie," New Guy ordered me and then did the weirdest thing ever. He took off his shirt.

Not that I didn't appreciate what was under his shirt, but I screamed again. Well what was I supposed to do? The guy comes out of nowhere, kills a dog, pins me to the ground, and takes his clothes off? Oh yeah, and he knows my name. How does he know my name?

It wasn't until he wadded up his shirt and plastered it against the back of my head that I realized maybe he wasn't attacking me. Once I understood this it finally dawned on me how much pain I was in.

There was a pounding in my head like nothing I've ever felt, and it seemed to match the rhythm of my heartbeat. The thud, thud, thud was echoing in my ears and making my brain want to explode, but it was soon overpowered by a much worse sound. One that was unfortunately all too familiar, and makes my head ache even when I haven't just cracked it on the driveway.

"Ellie! What the freak is with the screaming? I'm on the phone!"

Angela was saying until she got to the driveway and saw what was going on. The shriek that followed was blood curdling.

"Don't worry, she'll be all right, but she's going to need stitches."

I was startled because the voice came from so close to me. It's like I'd forgotten the new kid was there, and when I looked up I was surprised to see his face just a foot from mine. *They're blue*, I thought as I finally got a really good look at his eyes. I'd been wondering all week what color they were. It was hard to tell from my window. *Deep, dark, ocean blue. Gorgeous, just like the rest of him.*

He looked down at me suddenly with the same amused grin he'd given me from his bedroom window, which I thought was strange. But maybe I was looking at him cross-eyed since he held a finger up in front of me and slowly waved it from side to side. The motion made me nauseous.

"She might have a concussion, too," he said, still grinning at me. Is a concussion funny? It certainly didn't feel funny. "We should get her to a hospital. Are your parents home?"

"They're both at work," Angela replied in a frantic voice.

She came rushing to my side as if she were completely freaked out, but I noticed the way she put her hand down on New Guy's forearm as she pretended to care about my well-being. I smirked at her fingers clinging to his skin. *Obvious much, Ang?*

Angela was suddenly glaring at me for some reason, and the new guy laughed. It was quite irritating because the situation was anything but funny. I would have told him just where he could shove that laugh of his, but I started seeing these big, dark spots floating all around me, and sort of forgot that I was annoyed.

Plus, he didn't fall for Angela's *CosmoGIRL!* techniques for getting his attention. He looked down at the hand on his arm and immediately removed it. That earned him a couple brownie points with me until he took her hand and placed it on the shirt he'd been pressing against my head. "Hold this," he instructed and then got to his feet to let my sister tend to me.

I was going to school him on just how not smart it was to leave a dying girl in the hands of my sister, when I saw him scoop up something huge into his arms, and I remembered what happened. *Bruno! How could I have forgotten about Bruno? He totally killed Bruno! He's a dog killer!*

I wanted to yell at him, but he'd already disappeared inside his house. He came back a minute later with keys in his hand instead of a dog, and a new shirt on—to both my sister's and my disappointment. "You know where there's a hospital?" he asked Angela, handing her the keys to his BMW.

"Uh, just a mile or two from here," Angela said, staring at the keys

in her hand.

"Good. I'll get her. You drive."

The next thing I knew I was being scooped carefully off the ground. My head responded with a vengeance, and I groaned when everything started to go black around me. Unfortunately I didn't get to pass out because Angela screamed again. "There's so much blood!"

I could feel the new guy shrug his shoulders beneath my weight and then he said, "I've seen a lot worse."

"You've seen *worse*?" Angela asked, vocalizing my exact thoughts.

New Guy didn't explain himself, though. "She's got plenty left. Trust me."

Angela frowned but New Guy just swept past her, not bothered in the least by my weight—which is a lot more than you'd think considering how skinny I look—and asked her to open the car door for him.

Angela did as she was told, but as the new guy climbed into the backseat with me she asked, "Doesn't blood stain? You're going to get it all over your car." Leave it to Angela to be worried about the car and not her dying baby sister.

I could barely make sense of anything at this point. My head hurt so bad the pain was almost numbing, and I was growing more and more tired by the second, but I could still hear the words he muttered under his breath as he pulled me against his chest, holding his shirt tightly against the back of my head again. The expression on his face grew disturbingly dark and he muttered, "Wouldn't be the first time."

"W-what d-do you mean not the first time?" I stammered, a little distracted by the threat of unconsciousness.

His scowl was gone so fast I wasn't sure it'd been there. "Shh," he said with a wink. Then he looked up at Angela and barked, "Just hurry, okay?"

The movement of the car only made my stomach feel even queasier. It made it very hard to fight off the unconsciousness that had been trying to overcome me. The world around me seemed to slip out of focus and then my eyelids drooped.

"Oh, no you don't." The new kid's voice was extremely tender, but the pat he gave my cheek, that made my eyes roll forward once again was quite the slap. "No falling asleep."

Can't help it, I thought. *I'm so tired, and you're so comfortable.* Maybe it was the possible concussion, but this was the closest I'd ever been to a boy that hadn't just mowed me down chasing after a puck, and I fully intended to take advantage of it. I relaxed in his arms and enjoyed the feel of the chest I was being held against. *For someone with such hard-looking muscles, the new kid is surprisingly soft.*

New Guy's chest started to tremble beneath me and I looked up to

see him shaking his head with laughter. I'd officially had it with this guy and his being amused with my dying. My anger managed to give me a little burst of energy. Enough to steady my gaze momentarily and growl, "Something funny?"

I thought I sounded pretty menacing, but New Guy didn't bother to wipe the smile from his face. He just looked down at me and shrugged. "You are."

I tried to glare again, but I couldn't focus my eyes enough to do it. I don't think I lost consciousness then, but maybe I did, because New Guy touched my face again. Only this time he didn't slap it to keep me awake, he started brushing his fingers back and forth along my cheek.

The warm tingly sensation his fingers left on my skin was something I'd never felt before. Certainly nothing like whenever the J's tug on my ponytail, or give me an elbow jab, or even when they give me a hand up after they've knocked me to the ground. This was different. It was like magic. Wonderful, wonderful magic that made all the pain in my head disappear.

I was sure it was a concussion-induced hallucination, but even still, I was beginning to think it was worth it. That is, until New Guy brushed my hair out of my face and said, "Such shiny, bright, red hair. Gorgeous, just like the rest of you."

My stomach lurched and it had nothing to do with my head injury. I recognized his words. Hadn't I thought the exact same ones about him only minutes before? Had I really been talking out loud this whole time? Suddenly, all his amusement made sense. The humiliation was too much for me to handle with everything else going on at the moment, and all those spots in my vision finally lumped into one giant shroud of black.

I only spent one night in the hospital, but I still came home with a raging headache. Between the pain and the painkillers, I was pretty out of it for a good two days. I wasn't sure how long I'd been drifting in and out of consciousness, but I knew when I woke up this time that I was really awake and was going to stay that way.

My room was bright and airy since my window was open, but the light made my head hurt like a son of a you-know-what. I threw my arm over my eyes and reached beside my bed where I always keep one of those grabby things. Usually I use the grabby thing when I leave my game controller on my nightstand or drop one of my Twizzlers, but today I used it to grab my window shade.

Concussion or not, I have excellent hand-eye coordination and with just one little grab I plunged myself into total darkness. "Hey!" Angela immediately protested.

Angela's voice is not what you want to hear when you are recovering from a concussion. "Get out of my room," I groaned since I didn't really have the energy to yell.

"No way. You have a much better view than I do."

"View of what?"

"The new kid is playing darts in his garage."

"Darts? Who plays darts?"

Angela pulled the blinds up again. I would have protested the action except that she said, "Who cares? He's doing it without a shirt on."

I got out of bed, found a dark pair of sunglasses, and pushed Angela aside to take a peek. Just as I looked, the new kid flicked his wrist and sent a dart flying into what looked like the direct center of a bull's-eye. He smiled to himself as he crossed the garage and admired his aim, then he reached for his shirt. I was worried that he was going to put it back on, but instead he used it to wipe the sweat off his face and began guzzling a bottle of water.

"This is even better than *Grey's Anatomy*," Angela sighed, plopping down onto my bed when he disappeared into his house.

"He's gone. You can leave now," I said, pushing Angela out of my way so that I could lay back down.

I pulled my covers over my head, but Angela yanked them right

back off. “Get up and get dressed,” she told me. “We’re going over there.”

“What?”

“C’mon, while we know he’s home.”

“Why do I have to go?”

“You have an excuse to go over there. I don’t.”

“What excuse?”

“Duh. You want to at least know the name of the boy who saved your life.”

“He didn’t tell you his name? Didn’t you guys spend hours flirting in the waiting room while I was unconscious?”

I laughed when Angela frowned. Apparently the answer to my question was no.

“Shut up! He just never got the chance. As soon as we got to the hospital, he let some guys wheel you inside and then said he had to go.”

“He just left us at the hospital?”

I thought this was strange, but Angela didn’t agree. “It’s not like he could have done anything else. They wouldn’t have let him come back with us because he wasn’t family.”

“Still, to just dump two girls off at the emergency room and not even stick around to see if I was okay?”

“Way to be self-absorbed Ellie.”

“That’s not what I mean. There’s something really weird about that guy.”

Angela finally lost her patience with me and began tapping her foot as she stood over my bed. “Get your lazy butt up right now or I will be forced to sit in here with you all day.”

Ugh. She would do it too. I had no choice but to drag myself from bed.

When I got up Angela narrowed her eyes at me. “Nothing dirty, no jeans with holes in them, and absolutely no jerseys. When you’re dressed, I will do your hair so that we can cover up those nasty stitches. Thank goodness the cut was low enough that they didn’t have to shave half your head.”

“Would you give it a rest? My head is pounding again,” I grumbled. “And it’s not from the concussion.”

“Just hurry,” Angela snapped and slammed my door on her way out.

I went to pull my shade down again so that I could change, and, not that I was looking or anything, but I just happened to notice the new kid reappear in his garage. He examined the dart still stuck in the target, and then pulled something from his back pocket. He threw so fast I didn’t even see the knife until it was lodged in the bull’s-eye in

the exact spot the dart had been moments before.

There was no smile on his face as he admired his aim this time. He pulled the knife out of the dartboard and then as quick as the first time, he threw it again. The action was so fast it took me a minute to figure out where it landed. But then I saw a mannequin in the corner of the garage rocking on its stand, the knife sticking out of its throat.

With a gasp, I quickly ducked out of view from the window. I jumped back so fast that I banged the back of my head on my closet door. It freaking hurt, and I yelled like there was no tomorrow.

"What is going on in here?" Angela asked, barging into my room, yet again. She took one look at me and her frown got even bigger. "You're not even dressed yet!"

"Angela!" I hissed, pulling her out of view of the window. "He's crazy!"

"What are you talking about?"

"The new kid!"

Angela pulled free from my grip and looked out the window. "There's nobody out there."

She was right. I looked again and he'd already gone back inside and had apparently taken his knife with him. "He had a knife. He threw it at that dummy. Slit the freaking thing's throat. It hit dead center, like he could do it blindfolded."

Angela rolled her eyes and then pulled the prescription pill bottle off my nightstand. "How many of these did you take?"

"I'm not high on painkillers, you idiot."

"You sure sound like it."

Angela let go a frustrated groan and began tugging me out of my room. "I'm not going over there!" I protested.

"Fine!" Angela screamed. "Be a loser! I'll go by myself."

"You can't go over there! What if he slits *your* throat next?"

Angela crossed her arms and gave me the evilest sneer. "Then you can blame yourself for my death because you made me go over there alone."

She stomped out of my room and I could hear her as she trotted down each and every stair. Then she slammed the front door. "Angela!" I called down to her from my window in another hiss.

The glare she gave me was enough for me to know that she was not going to listen to me. When she started to head down the driveway, my eyes drifted back to the house across the street and then naturally made their way up to *his* window. His blinds were down but cracked open the tiniest bit, and I could swear I saw a shadow standing behind them.

What was I supposed to do? I couldn't just let her go over there alone. The guy was a psycho. First he killed the Haskins' dog, and now

he's an expert knife slinger? "Angela, wait! Fine! I'll come. Just… hold on."

"Ten seconds," she called up to me.

I threw on the first shirt I could find that didn't have anyone's number on it, ignored the no holes in the jeans request, and then carefully pulled my hair back into a ponytail. I, for one, didn't care if my stitches were showing. Angela rolled her eyes when she saw me, but didn't say anything except, "Took you long enough."

"I hate you," I grumbled and then headed across the street with my sister, against my better judgment, to meet the new neighbor.

We got as far as his mailbox when a car blared its horn behind us. I reached up to grab my throbbing head while Angela whirled around to greet her unexpected company. I have no idea which of her gazillion male admirers were in the car, but one of them hung his head out the window and said, "Ang, babe, we're all going to the park for some frisbee football. Teddy and Alex are bringing a barbeque."

Angela glanced longingly back at the new kid's house. She sighed and then climbed into the car without even a second glance at me. I could here her shrieking playfully as the car sped off. I sighed too, but mine was a sigh of relief.

The whole ordeal left me feeling particularly exhausted, and my head was throbbing. Especially since I'd whacked it again. I headed back home refusing to look over my shoulder at the house behind me, and went straight to the comfort of my dark room. I swallowed one of the pills on my dresser, turned on my fan, then collapsed on my bed and waited for the painkillers to render me unconscious.

I don't know how long I slept, but when I woke up I was assaulted by sunlight again. "Come on Angela, give me a break," I groaned, throwing my arm over my eyes.

I reached for my grabby thing again, and with as much ease as I'd done it earlier, I pulled my shade down. I was about to yell at Angela to get out of my room, when a strange voice broke the silence. "Now that was almost as impressive as your high score on *Skateboard Pro 2000*. I've been trying to beat it for three hours and haven't even come close."

I looked down to see a shadowed figure sprawled across my beanbag chair playing my X-box and, well, what else was I going to do? I screamed bloody murder. Only when I screamed it nearly made my head explode so it wasn't all that impressive and turned into a groan rather quickly.

"You know, Ellie," the stranger, who's voice suddenly seemed extremely familiar, said with another laugh, "you're going to give me a complex if you continue to scream like that every time we meet."

I felt like I should be fearful for my life, but even in the mostly-dark room I could see him grin up at me from beneath those eyelashes that Angela would have killed for. That face should be illegal.

As I continued to lay there, mesmerized by his beauty, his grin turned a little lopsided. "You feeling okay?" he asked. "You seemed a lot more…" he searched for a word and settled on, "…*talkative* before."

Slowly, the memory of smacking my head pieced itself together. Though it was near impossible to look away from the gorgeous guy who'd come to my rescue, I threw my arm back over my eyes. "I was concussed!" I gasped. "My brain was scrambled. Whatever I said, it didn't count."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said, laughing. "I kind of liked the idea of being gorgeous."

I was so glad my arm was still covering my face, because I'm pretty sure he would have taken great pleasure in watching me blush. I'd never told a boy I thought he was good-looking before, but since he wasn't pretending I hadn't said it, I didn't see any way that I could deny it. "I'm sure you already know that," I mumbled.

I nearly had a heart attack when my arm was lifted off my face. I hadn't heard him get up, or noticed when he sat down on my bed, but my new neighbor was now smiling down at me from an alarmingly close distance. "It's still nice to know that *you* think so," he said in a voice that no guy had ever used on me before—like velvet and hormones mixed together. It sent shivers through me, and don't think he didn't notice my reaction.

He hovered above me for a minute, staring so intensely into my eyes that it was causing my heart to do strange things in my chest. When I gulped, his smile widened. "Seth Bishop," he said with a twinkle in those deep blue eyes of his.

"Seth," I breathed automatically, and then a second later was able to reclaim my swimming head. A little. I sounded breathless, but still managed to voice my main concern. "What the *hell* are you doing in my room?"

He was surprised enough by my question that he afforded me my personal space, but amused enough by it that he didn't go far. "You should be nice to me," he said, still grinning. "I saved your life."

It was easier to concentrate when he wasn't *right there* anymore. I started to get my confidence back. "And that gives you the right to break into my room and try to beat my *Skateboard Pro 2000* record? Which, just so you know, will *never* happen."

Now that I could breathe again, I started to sit up. I definitely could have managed on my own but the minute I moved, Seth jumped up. "Careful." He actually fluffed my pillow for me and then gently helped

me lean up a little. When I was situated he asked, “You good? Need me to get you anything?”

I just shook my head incredulously. No guy had ever done anything like that for me before. I mean, the J’s would have come to keep me company and all if they could have, but they would still have made me do paper-rock-scissors to see who had to go downstairs to get the sodas.

“What’s the matter with you?” Seth asked, laughing at the expression on my face.

I shook my head and said the first thing I could think of. “You killed Bruno.” Random, I know. But no way was I going to admit what was really wrong—that it freaked me out to be treated like a girl.

Seth bit back a smile and plopped back down into my beanbag chair. “He tried to kill you first,” he argued lightly.

I couldn’t believe his response. It was so heartless. How could he be so nonchalant about taking the life of a big, dumb, but really sweet, and totally innocent dog?

“He was just excited to see me!” I yelled, forgetting that doing so would only cause me pain. I had to lower my voice again, but that was probably a good thing, because I was suddenly a little choked up. “It was my own fault—always take the skates off before the helmet. Bruno wasn’t trying to hurt me. He wouldn’t hurt anybody!”

“How was I supposed to know that?” Seth retorted. “I’m up in my room, hear you screaming ‘No!’ and look out the window just in time to see a big pit-bull knock you to the ground. You were bleeding all over, and he was attacking your face.”

“He was *licking* my face. And he’s not a pit-bull.”

“Whatever.” Seth rolled his eyes at me. “The dog’s fine anyways. I just stunned him is all. He was tearing up my back yard before I even got back from the hospital.”

“Bruno’s not dead?” This made me feel so much better.

“Of course not. What kind of guy do you think I am?”

“I don’t know what kind of guy you are. I don’t know you. Which reminds me. What are you doing in my room?”

He thought about not answering my question again, but then shrugged. “Your sister ditched you. I didn’t think you should be alone in your condition.”

“My *condition*? I have a headache. I’m not an invalid. I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Ellie.” His voice made it sound as if what I said was absurd. “You left me no choice. I have been dying for you to come introduce yourself to me since the day I moved in. It wasn’t nice of you to tease me like that this morning. You got my hopes all up and then turned around and went back home.”

"What?" I gasped.

"I don't know how it works here, but out in California it's customary for people to welcome their new neighbors."

"My mom brought you cookies the first day you got here," I said confused.

"Yeah, your mom. I don't care about your mom."

"Angela went over there to invite you to her beach party the other day."

"Beach party?" he asked, distracted. Now he was the confused one.

"Michigan is surrounded by water on three sides," I said. "We may not have waves, but we have lots of beaches."

Seth frowned. "Beaches are useless without waves."

"Not my point." Even though I happened to agree. I'm not much of a water fan. Unless it's frozen, of course. "I happen to know you were home when she went over, and you didn't answer the door."

His eyes flashed up in surprise and it took him a minute before he could respond. I realized that I'd just admitted to spying on him, but, thankfully, he seemed to be more concerned with being busted.

"Maybe I was washing my hair," he finally said, fighting a smile.

"You blew off Angela?"

He couldn't hold back his grin anymore. "Maybe."

"Are you gay or something?"

I was glad to see that my comment mildly annoyed him. "Not everyone from California is gay," he informed me.

"You blew off *Angela*," I repeated. "*Nobody* blows off Angela."

"She wasn't the sister I hoped would come see me."

What!

"Me?" I laughed to cover up my sudden nerves. "Please."

"Your sister's hot," Seth admitted, not with any real enthusiasm. "But she knows it."

"Oh, so you mean she's just like you?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Seth got really quiet all the sudden. Then, after a minute, he said, "Would you like me to go?"

Something about the kid unsettled me, but the thought of him leaving surprisingly made my stomach churn. "I don't know," I said honestly. I hoped I sounded casual. I didn't want him to know that he both excited and scared me.

He smiled at me again, but it was less confident somehow, I think he was afraid I might actually kick him out. I relaxed a tiny bit, but I didn't know what to say, so I waited for him to talk.

He got up off my beanbag chair and sat instead on my dresser, pulling the only framed photo I kept in my room into his hands. It was a picture of Jesse, Jack, me, and Josh all in our hockey gear. Jack's nose was bleeding, Jesse was missing a tooth, and Josh, whose eye

was purple and swollen, was carrying me in his arms. But we were all smiling as if it had been the best day of our lives.

I loved that picture. Seth seemed to enjoy it too. He studied it for a few minutes with a grin on his face, and eventually turned it towards me. He pointed to the kid holding me and said, "This is Josh, right?"

"Um, yeah." I was startled. "How'd you know that?"

"Just a guess. Of all these guys, he seems like the one who would have all nine of the top scores behind yours on *Skateboard Pro 2000*."

I couldn't help smiling at that. "He's been obsessed with beating my score for almost a year now. He'll never do it though. If he ever does, I'll just have to beat it ten more times and wipe his name completely off the list."

Seth looked down at the picture some more and then lifted just his eyes as he asked, "He's your boyfriend?"

"No!" I gasped, too appalled by the thought to blush at the question. I pointed to the picture and said, "He was just the only one strong enough to carry me home that day. I'd taken a cheap shot from a kid on the opposing team. Actually tore a ligament in my ankle." I smiled again as I remembered the fight it caused. "As you can see, the guys didn't take too kindly to that. I went down, and they didn't even know I was hurt before they started punching anyone and everyone they could. It was one of the finest moments in street hockey history."

Seth smiled at the story and pointed to the picture again. "So what about these guys?"

"Jesse, and Jack," I clarified as he pointed them out. "What about them?"

"Are either of them your boyfriend?"

Hearing him say the word boyfriend was just as startling the second time, and this time I did blush. Not because I was in any way interested in Jack or Jesse. Dating any of the J's would have been like dating, not my brother necessarily, but definitely a stepbrother, or a cousin. I blushed because I was embarrassed that this stranger was asking about my love life—which, of course, I didn't have one.

"None of them are my boyfriend."

I tried to sound annoyed by the subject instead of freaked out like I was, but it obviously didn't work because Seth put the picture down and came back to my bedside. His smile went back to amused and slightly cocky. "Does that mean you don't have a boyfriend?"

I narrowed my eyes at him but he still figured out the truth. He gazed at me for a moment then asked, "Have you *ever* had a boyfriend?"

I blushed again. Even deeper than before. My lack of response answered the question for me. I think this was the reaction Seth was hoping for since he leaned in really close. I instinctively tried to back

away from him but seeing as how I was lying in bed, and he was blocking my escape, the only thing I could do was sink down into my pillow.

"I wonder…" he said when I could sink no lower. I was flat on my back again, ignoring the discomfort the pressure was causing my stitches. He leaned completely over me, trapping me between his hands and hovering at arms length directly above me. His eyes were still quizzical, and yet they burned, almost wild, as he stared down at me.

When he spoke again, it was a whisper. A velvety-smooth, dangerous whisper. "Have you ever been kissed, Ellie?"

I sucked in a deep breath and then held it while the blood drained from my face. I was frozen, completely terrified by this beautiful boy and what it looked like he was about to do.

When Seth leaned in and brought one of his hands to my face, I flinched so violently it startled him. Instead of kissing me—which I'm pretty sure he wanted to do—he sat back up and whispered, "Okay. Relax." He brushed the hair away from my eyes, and then ran the backs of his fingers down the length of my cheek. "When you're ready." It sounded like a promise.

"I think I'd like you to leave now," I whispered when I could finally catch my breath.

Seth pulled his hand away from me, his eyes studying mine, but the smile stayed on his face. "Don't be a stranger," he said and then disappeared out my window.

I listened for his retreat, but he never made a sound. When I was sure he was gone, I ran to my window and locked it. Then, after that, I went through the house and did the same to every window and all the doors too.

For the next couple of days I avoided the house across the street. I still took the occasional peek out the window during the workouts, but my days of obsessive spying were over. Then Saturday night Heather Monroe was murdered and things slowly began to change.

My dad and I were watching the eleven o'clock news, waiting for the sports re-cap when the girl's tragic story came up. I didn't know Heather Monroe from Novi, and, sadly, I wasn't shocked to hear a story about a girl who'd been found beaten and stabbed 37 times—I do live in the greater Detroit area. But when her picture flashed up on the screen I found myself staring at a fifteen-year-old, tall, skinny, red-haired, hazel-eyed girl.

Something about the image was haunting, and not just because I'm a fifteen-year-old, tall, skinny, red-haired, hazel-eyed girl. It was more than that. Heather Monroe could have been my twin sister. I know I wasn't the only one thinking that either, because my dad immediately turned off the TV, kissed the top of my head, told me how much he loved me, and then left the room.

That same night I dreamed of Seth for the first time. I was standing in his garage and the entire wall behind me was painted like a giant bull's-eye. I felt afraid. I needed to escape, but my legs wouldn't move.

Seth was there, and when he looked at me with those blue, blue eyes, I got lost in them. "Ellie," he called to me, whispered my name almost reverently.

Then he began throwing knives at me. I couldn't move. The only thing I could do was pinch my eyes shut and wait for the pain, but the pain didn't come. I opened my eyes again and the knives had landed in my clothing, pinning my arms and legs to the bull's-eye behind me. I was trapped.

He walked up to me, admiring his aim. My breath got shallower with every step he took my direction. "Ellie," he whispered again as he brought the tip of a knife to the side of my face. "Relax."

He dragged the blade down my cheek and then down the side of my neck so lightly that it could have been his fingers caressing me. Then he dropped the knife to the ground. I flinched at the sound and that's when he kissed me. He kissed me, and kissed me, and kissed me until I

thought my body would melt from the wall into a small puddle on the floor.

Someone began pounding on the garage door, yelling my name. I knew I should call out for help, but I couldn't make myself do it. Not when his kisses were making me feel so good. The knocking got louder and louder until eventually my mom walked into my room and shook me. I woke with a gasp and my mom was immediately concerned.

"It was just a dream, Mom," I told her, trying not to flush because I could still almost feel Seth's lips on mine. "A nightmare. I think."

She smiled understandingly and then pushed my hair back to look at my stitches. "How's your head this morning?"

I thought about it for a second. "A lot better. The headache's gone."

"I felt bad having to leave you every day," Mom said with a sigh. "I should have taken a few days off work, but with the cruise coming up I didn't really have any time."

"Don't worry about it," I said quickly, not wanting her to feel guilty.

She and Dad are going on a cruise later this summer for their twentieth anniversary. They've never been on a real vacation before and I don't think I've ever seen either of them more excited about anything in their lives. They've been the easiest parents ever since they booked the trip. They didn't even ground me when I got suspended the last month of school for wailing on Gabby Reese after she called me a lesbian. No need to kill their moods over one dumb accident.

"I just slept most of the time anyway," I assured her. "And I really am feeling a lot better today. I could probably even go for a skate later. I'm dying to get out of the house for a while."

Mom frowned at that but then sighed. "Just be careful and remember—"

"Always take the skates off before the helmet," I finished for her, nodding my understanding.

Mom's concern melted into a smile. "I've got to go to the supermarket now, do you want anything?"

"Rocky Road and Mint Chip?"

Mom laughed. "I guess you really are feeling better." She stood up from my bed and stopped at my door. "Take it easy today, Gretzky."

"I did take it easy!" I yelled before my mom could say anything when I rolled into the house later that evening covered in blood. I leaned over the kitchen sink and began to wash the blood off my hands and face. "It was just a small pickup game in the park and I didn't even hit back!"

"What happened?" Dad asked from somewhere in the family room.

“I took an elbow in the nose. Don’t worry I’m sure it’s not broken. Can somebody hand me a freaking towel?”

I suddenly got what I asked for. More than I asked for. I was pulled against a body and my head gently tilted back until it was resting on someone’s shoulder. Then the dishtowel I’d requested was pressed lightly to my throbbing nose. I instinctively screamed and tried to escape my surprise captor, but the arm around my waist was a vice.

“There are easier ways of getting my attention than continually bloodying yourself, Ellie,” the object of my nightmare cooed. His lips brushed my ear, breath as warm as it had been in my dream.

For a single instant I thought I’d been knocked out during the game and was having another nightmare. I wrestled free of the embrace to find Seth looking wickedly amused.

“What is the matter with you?” I gasped.

Seth held up the bloody towel with the perfect mask of innocence. “Just trying to help.”

I snatched the towel from his hands angrily, and took a safe step away from him as I attempted to stop the nosebleed on my own. “What are you doing here?”

Angela came into the kitchen and pulled something from the fridge. “Ellie, is that any way to greet a guest? This is Seth,” she informed me. “Aren’t you excited to finally meet your knight in shining armor?”

“It is nice to finally meet you,” Seth agreed. The knowing smile he flashed me sent two different kinds of chills through me.

“Yeah,” I said sarcastically. “Finally.”

I was glad when Angela broke the awkward silence, and even more glad when she weaved her arm around Seth’s. “Dinner’s all ready,” she said, pulling him the direction of the dining room. “You can sit next to me.” It was a relief to have that killer smile of his pointed at someone besides me this time.

I retreated to the safety of my room and took a deep breath when the door was shut securely behind me. As I changed out of my blood-soaked shirt, I thought about the person downstairs waiting to have dinner with my family. So he liked to throw knives at mannequins and had no sense of personal space, that wasn’t really reason to fear him. I mean Vince Kowalski had no problem invading my personal space as he was bashing my face in this afternoon, and I didn’t fear him. In fact, the next time I was in the game with Vince, he was going to be really sorry.

But still, there was something very unsettling about Seth and it really irked me. I went downstairs determined not to let this guy intimidate me. After all, no guy ever had before.

“Here she is!” my dad exclaimed proudly when I entered the dining room. “This is our youngest daughter, Ellie.”

My dad gestured to me and then swept his hand toward the woman I'd seen driving the BMW. She was even more striking up close and seemed oddly out of place at our dingy old dinner table. "Ellie, this is our new neighbor Janice Wainwright, and, of course, you've already met her nephew, Seth Bishop."

I tried to brace myself as I looked the direction my father was now pointing, but it didn't do me any good. I met Seth's eyes and instantly all my resolve flew out the window. My heart sped up, my adrenaline spiked, and judging by the way Seth was watching me—a predator stalking his prey—I was beginning to think he could smell my fear.

"Hey," I mumbled, taking the seat they'd saved me, which was unfortunately directly across the table from Seth. I glued my eyes to my plate.

"Ellie, where are your manners?" Mom chided. Something she did a lot with me.

I looked up then, but at least now I was annoyed instead of intimidated. Seth grinned at me and I tried to keep the edge out of my voice as I said, "Thanks for helping me."

"Helping you?" Angela repeated incredulously. "Ellie, he *rescued* you." She turned to Seth then, glowing with admiration. "You saved her life."

Seth flashed me another smile. "It was my pleasure."

Angela quickly tried to regain his attention. "I don't know how you stayed so calm," she said. "There was so much blood. You must be really brave."

"Or maybe he just likes blood," I grumbled under my breath.

"Actually," Seth's aunt spoke up, startling me. For a moment I wondered if she'd heard me, but she was smiling. "Seth is great in emergency situations. He's certified in both CPR and First Aid and has had self-defense training."

Is expert knife slinging considered self-defense? I wanted to ask.

"Really?" Angela cooed, resting her hand on his arm. "That's so great!"

"Yes, I have high hopes that he'll be a great doctor one day," Ms. Wainwright continued to brag.

"A doctor!" Angela gasped. "Yeah, after seeing you in action, I'm sure you'd make a great doctor."

"Maybe I should," Seth said lightly. "Seems to me you could use one on staff in this house for Ellie alone."

Everyone laughed at that, except me, of course. To my horror all I could do was blush. It was my mom who finally threw me a bone and got the attention off of me. "Is that what you're going to study then?" she asked Seth. "I assume you'll be starting college in the fall."

"No, I'm just barely seventeen. I'll be a senior in the fall. Which is a

good thing because I don't have any idea what I want to do. I need the time to think about it."

My mom smiled sympathetically. "Transferring high schools before your senior year? That's got to be rough."

Ms. Wainwright sighed. "I did feel bad about having to move, but he's been very mature about it."

I caught my dad glancing at Angela with a smirk on his face and I couldn't hold back my smile either. Angela's going to be a senior too, and if my dad had transferred us this year, she would have started World War III. Dad winked at me and then we turned our attention back to the conversation.

"It won't be so bad," Seth was saying as he grinned at me again. "The neighborhood's already turned out to be much more exciting than I'd expected." Everyone chuckled again with more glances my direction. "Plus now I'll at least have a couple of friends to keep me company through the summer."

"Oh, more than just a couple!" Angela was practically bubbling over with excitement. "I can introduce you to a ton of people this summer. In fact, there's a big beach party this Friday. I know it's not exactly the kind of beach you're used to in California, but it's still really fun. My friend Rachel has a lake house with a boat and jet skis. Half the senior class is going."

"I don't know about this party Angela," Mom interrupted in a wary voice.

"Oh, don't worry, Mom. Rachel's parents will totally be there. It's a barbeque, not a rave."

"It's not that honey, I trust Rachel's parents. But after what happened to those other girls? I just don't know if it's a good idea to be out so late on the weekends right now."

"What girls?" Angela, Seth and I all asked in unison.

"Do you mean the two stabbing victims?" Seth's aunt asked and my mom nodded.

"Remember the girl we saw on the news last week?" Dad asked me suddenly. "The one who…"

Dad's voice trailed off and I shivered. "Heather Monroe," I said.

"She wasn't the only one. There was another girl the weekend before. Stabbed to death in Farmington Hills. She fit the same profile."

I shuddered again. I could tell by the look on Dad's face that by "the same profile" he meant a carbon copy of me. A moment passed between us, which Angela interrupted by blurting out, "Are you saying there's a serial killer on the loose right now?"

My face blanched and my dad quickly assured us that there wasn't. "You don't look too convinced," I told him, because he didn't.

"The murders may be connected," Seth said out of nowhere. "But

they can't be considered serial killings unless there's three or more."

Ms. Wainwright must have seen the look I was giving her nephew because she said, "No, he's right. I was watching a special report about it the other night. The police are actually pretty sure that the two deaths are coincidence."

"They're sure?" my mom asked.

Ms. Wainwright shrugged. "They seemed pretty confident."

Mom looked back at Angela. "When is this party?"

"Friday."

"And Rachel's parents will be there?"

Angela nodded. "Plus some of their friends too."

Mom looked at Dad and then back at Angela. Finally she sighed. "You can't go by yourself, and I expect you to be home by your normal curfew."

"There," Angela said turning to Seth. "You have to come with me now because I can't go alone."

Seth frowned in confusion. "Won't Ellie be going too?"

Angela snorted, which made Seth even more confused until he saw the look of disgust on my face.

"I'd rather take my chances with the serial killer."

"Ellie!" My mother. Again with the chiding.

For a moment everyone remembered that there was food on the table. I was glad for the silence, but I could feel Seth's eyes on me. I braved a glance and then wished I hadn't because he was watching me with that same intense-yet-amused look I'd seen on him so many times already and it reminded me of my dream.

When the phone blared to life in the kitchen it felt like one of life's small miracles. Angela jumped up, but before she could get two steps, my mom was hollering, "Sit back down, Angela!"

"But Mom—"

"But nothing. We're in the middle of a nice dinner with company."

"But you took my phone! I don't even have voice mail right now!"

"We have an answering machine."

"But—"

Mom finally silenced Angela's protests with a look and I laughed.

Angela is addicted to her cell phone, but last month she accrued like two hundred dollars in overages and my parents flipped. She's grounded from the thing for the whole summer. I don't have one either, but that's just because I don't ever need one. I only ever talk to the J's and they just come over. Most of the time they don't even bother to knock. Still, when my parents offered to let me use Angela's phone for the summer after she got grounded, I took it just to piss her off. It's buried somewhere in the mess that is my closet.

Angela caught me laughing at her and gave me a dirty look. I

started to stick my tongue out at her in retaliation but then the answering machine picked up the call in the kitchen. When I heard three very obnoxious voices call out "Westleeeeeeeeey!" I forgot about antagonizing my sister and shot out of my chair.

"Ellie!" my mom called in a warning tone.

"Mom! They're at camp! I can't just call them back!"

My dad, bless his bald head, reasoned with my mom and I took off, hoping to catch my best friends before they hung up. "What's up losers?" I said breathlessly.

For a minute all I could hear was chaos, and then someone obviously punched someone else. Apparently Jesse won the scuffle for control over the phone because he said, "You're never gonna guess!"

The excitement in his voice made me forget about everyone in the other room. "What?"

"We got to scrimmage with the Wings!"

"The Detroit Red Wings? You actually *played* with them?"

"Franzen, Zetterberg, Howard…" Jesse said, and Josh yelled in the background, "All of them!"

"NO FREAKING WAY! YOU GUYS SUCK!"

"Ellie!" Mom shouted from the dining room. "Language!"

I glanced her direction and immediately saw Seth watching me. Something about the look on his face pissed me off. "Sorry," I called to Mom. "I'll take it in the office."

"We still have company," she called back, slightly annoyed.

"Five minutes!"

I took the cordless phone past the downstairs bathroom and plopped down into my dad's desk chair as the J's took turns snagging the phone from each other in order to tell me all about the amazing summer they were having without me.

It was Josh who eventually said, "So you were in the hospital for a head injury? What's up with that? Can't hold your own on the court without us?"

"Please." I snorted. "I had to resort to playing at the park today and I killed those guys despite Vince Kowalski busting up my face."

"Kowalski mashed your face?" Jack said in the background—they must have had me on speaker. "Sweet! I've always wanted a reason to pound that dillweed."

"Sorry, Jack. He'll be dead long before you get back."

"Knock one of his teeth out for me!"

"With pleasure," I promised.

"So seriously, Westley," Josh said again. "Why were you in the hospital?"

"It was so stupid. My first concussion and it wasn't even in a game. Bruno got out of his yard. Jumped me without my helmet on. I almost

bled to death on the driveway. There's a huge stain there now."

"Awesome."

"Yeah, I'm gonna have a pretty nasty scar too."

"So who was the tool?" Jesse wanted to know.

"What tool?"

"We called last week and some guy answered. Said you couldn't talk because you just got back from the hospital and were asleep."

"He answered the phone?" I nearly yelled. For some reason the thought of Seth talking to the J's was horrifying.

"Who is he?"

"Just this guy. Him and his aunt moved into dead lady Cromsfield's house across the street."

"He got any game?"

I laughed. "Not any game that would be beneficial to you unless you're thinking of switching to the other team—if you catch my drift."

"The dude's gay?" Jack gasped. I heard a lot of snickering in the background.

"He's sure pretty enough to be gay," I said. "He's like a male version of Angela. Dresses like a JCrew model, styles his hair, probably has legions of zombie girls at his beck and call. Ang has been salivating over him since he showed up."

"Sounds like a bad horror film," Jack said at the same time as Angela appeared in the doorway of the office.

Bad horror film was exactly the right description for her. Specifically *Carrie* comes to mind—at the end when she goes psycho and wastes everyone at the prom. "Ellie!" she hissed, "Seth's in the bathroom! He can probably hear every word you're saying!"

"Well it's not like it isn't obvious," I snapped, annoyed that she'd been listening to my conversation. In my best helpless airhead voice I said, "Oh, Seth you're so brave! I'd play doctor with you anytime!" I rolled my eyes, switching back to my normal voice. "I think some of your drool actually fell onto his plate."

The guys were howling with laughter through the phone. Angela was turning a scary shade of red, enraged beyond anything I'd ever seen before, and Seth chose that exact moment to wander into the office. I think Angela's knees wanted to give out, but somehow she managed to storm out of the room.

Seth watched her go for a second, but quickly turned his attention back to me. "We miss you at the dinner table," he said with a grin. "Your mom sent me to drag you back." When I didn't respond he added, "I'm willing to use excessive force if necessary."

With the J's on the phone, it felt like they were standing right there with me. I drew a little courage from them, finally able to respond to Seth appropriately instead of melting into a big puddle of wuss. I

rolled my eyes at him and sighed into the phone. “I gotta go. My mom’s having a cow cause we’re eating dinner right now. You guys suck, you better at least have gotten me some autographs.”

I said goodbye and when I ended the call, Seth was still standing there. He was leaning against the doorway now, watching me, arms folded across his chest.

“What?” I snapped.

“You’re very interesting when you’re in your comfort zone,” he said thoughtfully.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“More so, I’m sure, than being pretty enough to be gay.”

My stomach lurched. He *had* heard what I’d said. I steeled myself, refusing to let him intimidate me again. “If you didn’t like what you heard, don’t eavesdrop next time.”

I tried to walk past him out of the office, and his hand shot out, blocking my exit. “I liked some of it,” he said. “I liked the part where you said you wanted to play doctor with me.”

I’m not sure how your stomach can cave in on itself and your heart can flip in your chest all at the same time, but the end result when it happened to me right then was that it caused my foot to stomp down on Seth’s as hard as it was capable. He stumbled back in surprise and I quickly made my escape.

When I sat back down Angela was glaring at me from across the table. Who knew I’d ever find her presence reassuring?

“Where’s Seth?” Ms. Wainwright suddenly asked.

I looked up, realizing he hadn’t followed me. *Good*, I thought. I shrugged and stuffed my mouth with enchiladas.

“Eleanor, don’t be so rude,” my mother said.

“What? I don’t know where he went. He told me to come back in here, so I did.”

“Eleanor?” Ms. Wainwright asked. “As in Roosevelt?”

“Exactly!” my mom said, forgetting about my attitude. She always gets excited when someone shows interest in my name. Probably because it so rarely happens. “That’s actually who we named her after, since she’s our little patriot. Born on the Fourth of July. She’s turning her sweet sixteen here in a few weeks.”

“Oh! Happy Birthday! Having your birthday on the Fourth of July must be kind of fun.”

“Oh yeah, it’s a real blast.” I tried not to be too sarcastic, but I don’t think it worked very well. “It’s in the middle of summer, and it’s a holiday, so none of your friends are ever around. Plus you get awesome patriotic names like Eleanor.”

My mom, who was sitting next to me, very subtly pinched me beneath the table. “Sorry,” I grumbled. Then I really tried to be

sincere. I don't know what was wrong with me. I'm not usually so grouchy. "I prefer Ellie," I told Seth's aunt.

Seth came back then, smiling pleasantly to everyone. "What'd I miss?"

Ms. Wainwright was more than happy to fill him in. "Eleanor—excuse me, *Ellie*—was born on Independence Day. She's about to turn __"

"Sweet sixteen," Seth finished for her. He looked at me then as if nothing had happened between us. As if I hadn't just made fun of him to my friends and stomped his foot when he made a pass at me. "Are you doing anything special? Party? Big date with your boyfriend?"

I knew he was just giving me a hard time, he already knew I didn't have a boyfriend, but Angela laughed so hard she choked on her food and was thrown into a coughing fit. Seth, I noticed, didn't seem to be in any hurry to come to her rescue.

"I'm buying a car," I said, indirectly answering Seth's questions because in fact I had exactly zero plans for my birthday. "Been saving up. My dad's going out with me this Saturday to pick one out."

"Oh, Ellie, honey." My dad cleared his throat and looked at me regretfully. "Didn't I tell you? I can't go this weekend. Last minute trade show in Des Moins."

"But, Dad! You promised!"

"I know kiddo, but I have to go. We'll go as soon as I can, though. It won't kill you to wait a week after you turn sixteen, will it?"

My heart sank. My dad was one of the few people in this city who didn't work for Ford, Chevy, or GM. He's the Mid-western sales manager for a company that makes medical equipment like MRI machines and stuff. He always has to take off for a day or two here and there. Especially on weekends.

I couldn't help slinking back in my chair and sulking. It was official. This was the worst summer of my life. Some sweet sixteen.

"If you'd like," Seth said after a minute, "I could take Ellie for you this Saturday."

I looked up, startled, but Seth was talking to my dad. Unfortunately my dad seemed to like his suggestion. "Do you know a lot about cars?" he asked Seth.

"I know enough. But I'm really good with salesmen."

"It's true," his aunt said, laughing. "That boy can haggle even the best down to pennies on the dollar."

I groaned inwardly. Having been a salesman the majority of his life, my dad was now looking at Seth half proud, half rising to the challenge. "That so?" he asked, leaning back in his chair, crossing his arms. He looked at my mother questioningly and she nodded enthusiastically.

“I don’t see the harm in it,” Mom said. “Ellie has been so excited about this. She’d probably prefer to go with someone closer to her own age anyway.” She looked to me then. “What do you think, Ellie? Can Seth fill your father’s shoes this time?”

“I’ll make it up to you, sweetheart,” Dad added. He really did look like he felt bad.

I sighed. If I said no right now, I’d hurt Dad’s feelings and my mom would probably get mad. Knowing her, I would get my car when Angela got her phone back.

“Okay, I guess.” And then, just because I knew my mother was waiting for it I mumbled, “Thanks,” to Seth. I didn’t look up to see whatever smirk was on his face.

Monday afternoon Angela spent a good half an hour sitting on Seth's front porch flirting with him over sodas. I'll admit to watching this, but not because I was spying on Seth. I just found it amusing to watch Angela fail miserably at her attempts to snag the hottie—however creepy—across the street.

Seth seemed to enjoy her company well enough, but he didn't act toward her anywhere near the same way he acted toward me. He talked, he smiled, he laughed, but he didn't touch her or crowd her. In fact, from where I stood he almost seemed like a normal person. Almost.

Just as I was considering the possibility that maybe I'd overreacted to him, Angela was whisked off by a group of her friends. I could tell that she'd invited Seth to come along, but he glanced up at my bedroom window and then turned her down. He waved as the car Angela jumped in drove off, and the second it was out of sight he immediately headed toward my house.

My heart raced as I ran downstairs. I told myself again that I'd overreacted and that he was normal, but for some reason I still hesitated to open the door when the doorbell rang. I stood there debating, my hand about to turn the knob, when his silky voice called out to me.

"El-lie," he sang. "Come out, come out, wherever you are! The cat's finally away. Time for the mouse to come out and play."

Instead of opening the door, as slowly and as silently as I could manage, I locked it. Then I crept back up to my room hoping to catch a glimpse of his face as he went back home. I peeked out the side of the shade and waited for him to cross the street, but instead a dark shadow appeared in front of my window. I leapt back and flattened myself against the wall just as Seth knocked on it.

"Ellie," he called, without the playful singing this time. "C'mon, I know you're in there. I also know you have a weakness for ice cream. Come hang out with me and we'll go to Dairy Queen. My treat."

My mouth watered at the thought of a Heath Blizzard and I nearly opened my window. Except… How did he know about my ice cream addiction?

"At least tell me you found my note."

Note? What note?

Seth sighed and then, as if reading my thoughts, said, "Look at the high scores on *Skateboard Pro 2000*."

Of course I checked. How could I not?

I was admittedly relieved when I saw my score still at the top of the list, but the next score was only one point below it and the following eight each one point lower than the next. As baffled by the impossibility of the scores as I was, I was even more surprised by the names claiming them—or words, rather. The top ten names on the high score list now read:

1. Ellie
2. You're
3. The
4. Only
5. Reason
6. I
7. Don't
8. Hate
9. Living
10. Here

I blinked. Then I read the message again. Then I had to sit down. It was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to me, and definitely the closest thing to a romantic gesture I'd ever received. I could feel the flush in my cheeks, but while my heart was thumping my brain was only processing fear. How had he done this? And *when*? Those scores had been normal the last time I played this game, and that was *after* the day I'd waken up to find him in my room.

"Ellie?"

Startled, I quietly went back over to my bed, sat there, and just waited. After a minute more I heard Seth get up and leave. I peeked out the window and watched him scale himself down the big tree next to my house.

He went back home and as he walked past the punching bag in his garage he took an angry swing at it. He started to go inside and then turned around and punched the thing again with his other hand. Then, suddenly, he was beating that bag to a bloody pulp. He pounded it for a solid five minutes with punches so fast I swear I couldn't even see half of them. When he finally stopped to catch his breath he shook his hand and examined his knuckles. After that, with one last glance my direction, he disappeared into his house.

The next day I went to the park to get in on a pick-up game and I noticed Seth watching me from a distance. After that, I spent the rest

of the week in my room and I was really starting to go crazy. I was lying on my bed reading a *Spiderman* comic when I heard a car start up. It sounded too nice to be any of my neighbors' minivans. I looked out my window just in time to see Seth drive off in his BMW.

I didn't waste a second of this opportunity. I threw my window open, cranked up my stereo, and put on my skates. I'd pulled out my hockey net and had just sailed my first ball through it when a voice behind me said, "I *knew* you were avoiding me."

I was so startled I nearly fell on my butt. "Where did you…?" My voice trailed off as I searched for the BMW I never heard return.

"I drove around the corner and parked," Seth said, understanding exactly why I was confused. "I knew you wouldn't come outside unless you thought I was gone."

I tried not to blush. I'm not sure how well it worked. "I'm not avoiding you," I said. Lying through my teeth of course. I looked down and slapped another ball into the net.

"I'm not mad at you, you know," Seth said.

"Mad at me?" I asked, startled. "Why would you be mad at me?"

"Oh, let's see. You called me gay. You stomped on my foot. And you're avoiding me for no reason?"

"You deserved to get your foot stomped, and I did not call you gay," I said, but my cheeks were burning again. "I called you pretty."

"You're still avoiding me."

"I am not avoiding you."

Seth clearly didn't believe me.

"You make me uncomfortable," I blurted before I could stop myself.

"Because of the intense attraction between us," Seth said, one hundred percent serious. "That's natural."

My mouth gaped.

"You'd get used to it if you'd quit avoiding me."

Seth took a step closer to me, and my breath caught.

"I am *not* attracted—" I stopped. He was giving me that look again, not believing a word I said.

If he was trying to make me angry, it worked. I shoved him back and shot another ball into the net. Seth watched with a frown. "Aren't you supposed to be using a puck?"

"When you're on the ice," I explained. I couldn't help my eye roll. Apparently I was right about him not having any game. "But a puck won't exactly sail down asphalt. In street hockey we use these." I smacked the last orange rubber ball and it flew directly into the center of the net.

"Teach me how to play," Seth said suddenly.

"You?" I asked doubtfully. I looked him over. Even now he was clean, his hair styled, not a single wrinkle in his clothes. "You want to

learn how to play hockey?"

Seth shrugged. "It seems to be a prerequisite for making friends around here."

"Angela and her friends don't play."

Seth smirked. "Teach me to play," he said again.

"I don't think so."

"I'll make it worth your while," Seth said. "We could trade."

"What do you mean, trade?"

"Trade services. You teach me to play hockey and I teach you something in return."

I didn't want to know what he meant by that, but the words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. "Teach me what?"

The wicked grin that flashed across his face confirmed my suspicions. "I can think of a million things I'd like to teach you," he said in that dangerously silky voice of his.

He reached up and tucked a wild strand of hair behind my ear. I trembled beneath his fingertips. He looked satisfied to have made me shudder and that stab of fear returned in my chest.

"I'm not interested in learning anything you have to teach me."

"How about self-defense?"

Even though the thought of self-defense training seemed like a wonderful idea—especially with Seth living across the street now—I was sure it involved a lot of physical contact. Not something I was particularly interested in getting into with him.

"I'm not your average wimpy girl. I can take care of myself," I said and then skated away from him.

I quickly picked up the balls I'd shot and as I reached for the net I was yanked off my feet. Seth grabbed me so forcefully it nearly knocked the wind from me. I gasped and then started to shout. "What are you doing? Let me go!"

I struggled as hard as I could, but he had my feet off the ground and my arms locked at my sides. Unlike the last time he'd held me, his muscles didn't feel soft. His body felt like steel against mine and I couldn't break free from the cage his arms created.

"Let me go!" I screamed again.

"Calm down, Ellie," Seth whispered in my ear. "I'm just trying to show you something."

"That you're a psycho?" I yelled. "I've already figured that out!"

I kicked my legs behind me, but it didn't seem to have any affect on his shins, not even with the added weight of the skates.

Seth's mouth was soft on my ear but his grip didn't give an inch. "You're so tempting."

His lips pressed against my neck in the smallest of kisses. The goose bumps it rose on my skin infuriated me. "Stop it!" I demanded,

throwing my head back. “Get your creepy pervert lips off me!”

My headbutt attempt failed and Seth whispered in my ear again. “Look at you right now. I could do anything I wanted to you, and you couldn’t stop me.” He kissed my neck again just to prove his point. “Do you like feeling so helpless?”

I really didn’t. I was more terrified than I could ever remember being. So terrified that water welled up in my eyes. And I. Do. Not. Cry.

“Let me teach you how to defend yourself,” Seth said.

“Put me down!” I demanded, horrified when my voice broke.

He released me then, and I shoved away from him as hard as I could. I blinked away the moisture in my eyes before it became actual tears. No way was I going to let him see just how much he’d scared me.

“You’re insane!”

“I was just trying to prove a point. You need me Ellie.”

“Stay away from me you freak!”

A look of anger swept across Seth’s face, but he didn’t lose his cool. He opened his mouth to say something, but Angela came out the front door. “Ellie, what are you screaming at? Oh, hey Seth! You ready to go?”

Go? I was confused.

Seth shot me a look I couldn’t read. Then, like a light switch, he flipped on a bright smile for my sister. “I’m ready whenever you are. And might I add, you’re looking particularly ravishing this afternoon.”

Seth took Angela’s hand and kissed it. I would have protested the gross flirting going on before my eyes except that Seth had never acted like that toward Angela before. His sudden odd behavior toward my sister creeped me out.

“So how far away is this place?” Seth asked. After another quick glance my direction he added, “I hope it’s a ways. I’m looking forward to having you all to myself for a while.”

Angela could barely string a sentence together she was so overwrought with ecstasy. “Actually, it’s almost two hours away.”

“Is that all? Well, we may just have to take a detour—get lost along the way.”

At this point, if Seth wanted to attack Angela she’d probably want him too. She had no idea that he was secretly deranged. I may hate my big sister, but I’m not about to let some psycho have her.

I watched Seth open the door to my dad’s car and help Angela into the driver’s seat. After he shut the door for her he walked past me with a wink. “Enjoy the rest of your day, Ellie,” he said with a hint of danger in his voice. “I’m certainly going to enjoy mine.”

Seth opened the passenger door and before he slid into his seat I

was already in the back buckling my seatbelt. Both Angela and Seth turned around at the same time to look at me. Angela looked incredulous but Seth was smiling like he just got what he'd wanted. I was beyond freaked, but I didn't trust him alone with my sister, so I didn't have a choice.

"What do you think you're doing?" Angela finally asked, breaking Seth and I from our staring match.

"Coming with."

"I don't think so."

I turned my anger on my sister. "Try and stop me."

Angela didn't know how to respond. I think she was more surprised by the fact that I wanted to come with her than she was horrified by the thought of having to bring me. Her eyes narrowed as she looked me over and then she huffed. "Well, you're not going like *that*."

"Like what?"

"It's a Lake party and you're in ratty jeans and a baggy jersey."

"Your point?"

"Lake party? You're supposed to dress in swimwear."

"Tough nuts. I don't even own a swimsuit."

Seth snickered and I glared at him so nastily that he actually threw up his hands in apology and wiped the smile from his face.

"All right," Angela said, sighing. "Seth, we'll be five minutes."

Angela dragged me from the car and up to her room. "You're lucky we're close to the same size." She threw me an olive green wad of fabric. "This will probably be a tiny bit too small on you, but close enough that it will work to your advantage."

I had no idea what she was talking about. "What is it?" I asked looking at the lump in my hand.

"A swimsuit, moron."

I pulled the two tiny pieces apart. "Where's the rest?"

"Just go put it on," Angela sneered. Then she threw me the tiniest pair of jean shorts I'd ever seen and a tank top. "You can wear that over the top of it. And go get your flip-flops bigfoot. You can't go the lake in Dickies."

"I'm not wearing—"

"Two minutes or we're gone," Angela said and then went to join Seth in the car.

I knew my sister. I knew she would leave just as she'd threatened, and part of me really wanted to let her. But then I thought of the way Seth had used the word *ravishing* while looking at her.

With a sigh I put on a bikini for the first time in my life. Suddenly I was grateful for the shorts and tank top even if they were meant to fit a Barbie-doll.

I didn't look in the mirror as I left the house—I was better off not

knowing. But I could imagine how ridiculous I looked when Seth laughed under his breath as I got in the car. “Oh, stuff it, Abercrombie!” I snapped.

Seth burst into wild laughter, and I could hear Angela muttering something to herself as we pulled out of the driveway. This was bound to be a crappy night.

Angela made quite the entrance with Seth in tow. And I do mean literally in tow. I hadn't said a word the whole drive no matter how much Seth tried to involve me in conversation, so about half way there he gave up and started being overly attentive to Angela again. She ate it up, and when they got out of the car she latched on to him so quickly you'd think he was a six million dollar designer purse.

The introductions started with my sister's best friend, and the party hostess, Rachel. Within seconds a crowd of interested girls swarmed. I stepped back, eager to escape, but then one of Angela's other friends, Brooke, caught my arm. "And who is this?" she asked Angela. She looked at me asking, "Are you new too?" then turned to Seth before I could respond. "Is this your sister?"

Most of Angela's friends aren't exactly Ivy League material, but that comment was blond even for Brooke. Not only was she one of my sister's best friends, but she sat right behind me in home economics all last year.

Angela and I exchanged a glance and Angela was the one to say, "Brooke, that's *Ellie*."

Brooke looked startled, and then gave me a once-over. Before she could say anything, some senior I didn't know said, "Who's Ellie?"

"My sister!" Angela snapped, frustrated.

The guy smiled at me in a way that shocked me. "I can see why you've kept her locked up."

I wasn't impressed with the cheese-ball line, just stunned. It was quite a relief when this guy Dave, who I play hockey with sometimes, walked past and went "*Westley?*" even if he was standing with Vince Kowalski and staring at me like I'd grown a third eye.

"What's up, Dave?" I said, trying to nod casually.

"Me, that's what." Dave looked me up and down with exaggerated slowness and then said, "Damn girl."

I flipped him off, but we were laughing at each other and then Vince snorted. "All this time Westley, I never knew you were a chick."

"That's funny," I said thoughtfully. "I always knew you were."

When Vince took a step toward me, Dave held him back and to me said, "Frisbee football. You in?"

I nodded. “Sure, in a while. I owe Kowalski a broken nose.”

Vince grabbed himself rudely and I flipped him off, too, but this time I wasn’t laughing.

I turned back around and Angela’s entire popular posse was staring at me. When I braved a glance at Seth his eyes were burning with wicked amusement. He was doing everything he could not to laugh.

“Let me know when it’s time to leave,” I grumbled to Angela and then stalked off to find a soda. I grabbed a Dr. Pepper and a hot dog and then found a spot to sit where I could keep an eye on my sister without being bothered.

Seth stuck like glue to Angela for a while, going out of his way to touch her or tease her unnecessarily, but I cold tell when he got bored with it. Apparently he had no intention of hurting Angela or taking advantage of her. He was just messing with me. He knew I’d only come because of him just like he knew I was watching his every move.

He’d been manipulating me from the moment Angela found us in the street, and I was totally acting the sucker. When this became obvious, I was mad at myself for letting him get to me. I refused to humor him a second longer.

Hoping that ignoring him completely would piss him off, I went to join the game of frisbee football that was still going on. When I approached, I was met with a few low whistles—all coming from guys I’d played against with the J’s. “I may be in a swimsuit,” I growled. “But I will still whoop anyone who doesn’t shut his pie hole right now.”

“We need one more over here,” someone said. It was the senior who’d fed me a pick-up line earlier. I couldn’t believe he was looking at me like he was really interested. No guy, other than my psycho neighbor, had ever shown interest in me before. Especially not someone who looked like him.

The guy had short sandy blond hair and pale grey eyes. He was a little too muscley for my taste, but still, he was pretty hot. I didn’t know whether to be thankful to Angela for making me show up half-naked, or annoyed. I did everything in my power not to blush as I went to stand by him, but was able to lose myself in the game rather quickly.

It was just a fun, friendly game of frisbee football to everyone playing except Vince Kowalski, who apparently thought it was the NFL. And also thought I was a tackle dummy. He tried to hit me several times and failed, but the third time I didn’t see him coming and he plowed me right into a group of girls who’d been watching on the sidelines.

In the collision I took a hard plastic sandal to the mouth and about four cups of diet coke to the front of my shirt. After regaining my

bearings, I reached up and felt my lip. It was bleeding where the sandal had popped it open. “Oh, that is *it*!” I yelled.

Dave offered me a hand up and as soon as I was on my feet I slugged Vince with everything I had in me. I hit him so hard he flew back into the guy behind him. My knuckles screamed in protest, but it was worth it because blood poured from Vince’s face like a waterfall. “Now we’re even,” I said and went off to find some ice for my hand.

On my way to the icebox I peeled off my soda-soaked tank top. I hated parading around in a swimsuit, but the shirt wasn’t just drenched with dark stains, it was sticky. Wet is one thing, but sticky is gross. Plus I needed the shirt.

I was trying, one handed, to tie the corners of the tank top around a huge mound of ice cubes when someone came up behind me and said, “Need some help with that?”

I smiled shyly at the guy who seemed to be my new admirer and let him take over. He picked up my hand and examined my knuckles for a minute. “That’s going to hurt for a couple of days,” he said and gently placed the ice on top of my hand.

He led me onto the deck of Rachel’s lake house and made someone move so that I could sit on one of the sofas. “I’m Travis,” he said as he sat down next to me.

“Ellie.”

“So I’ve heard.” Travis chuckled. He looked out at the group of guys still standing on the beach. The game wasn’t going anymore. “You’re the main topic of conversation right now. I think you broke that guy’s nose.”

I shrugged. “He had it coming.”

Travis laughed again and then said, “So how come I’ve never seen you at any parties before?”

“Parties aren’t really my thing.”

“That’s too bad. You sure know how to liven them up.”

I smiled a little at that but didn’t know what to say. After a moment Travis broke the silence again. “You want to go for a swim? I’ve already been in, the water’s really nice.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Water’s *really* not my thing.”

“How about the Jet Skis then? I’m a pretty decent driver. I could take you for a ride without dumping you in the lake.”

I hate to admit it, but I chickened out at his offer. Not that I’m a total coward, but I couldn’t believe what was happening. This guy was asking me to hang out with him. It was almost like he was asking me out on a date. I was excited, but the idea of having to be on the same Jet Ski with him, holding on to him and everything... “Thanks,” I said. “But I think I just need to take it easy for a while and maybe find some Motrin for my hand.”

“Oh, well, that works too. I’m sure they’ve got something in the house and then we can find a nice quiet place to get to know each other better.”

Travis jumped up and offered me a hand. He pulled me to my feet and didn’t let go of my fingers as he led me toward the back door. When we got there, Seth was leaning casually against the frame, blocking our entrance. “Going somewhere?” he asked us.

“What’s it to you, dude?” Travis asked, immediately taking the defensive.

I wasn’t about to let Seth start a fight with this guy, which appeared to be what he was trying to do. So instead of telling Seth to get lost, I explained myself. “I’m just getting some painkillers.”

“You mean like these?” Seth asked, pulling a small bottle of Motrin from his pocket.

“Do you always carry Motrin with you?” I asked, taking the bottle from him.

“Since I started hanging out with you,” he said. “Never know when you’re going to need it. That is the kind you use, right?”

“How did you know I—”

“And to wash them down,” he continued, handing me a can of Dr. Pepper. “I know that’s your favorite.”

I hated that Seth mysteriously knew so much about me, but I’d promised myself I wouldn’t let him get to me. I took the can and sighed. “Thank you, Seth.”

I smiled up at Travis, who was staring at Seth in a—let’s just say less than friendly manner. I squeezed his hand reassuringly. “Looks like he saved us a trip,” I said, tugging him back toward the swing.

Travis stopped me before I could sit. He glared at Seth, who was still leaning against the back door watching us, and said, “It’s getting a little crowded out here. Why don’t we go for a walk up the shore?”

I gulped. A romantic walk up the lakeshore with a guy I’d just met? “Um…”

“It’s almost dark,” Seth pointed out, inviting himself into our conversation.

Travis wheeled on Seth. “What’s your problem, bro?”

Travis was bigger than Seth, but Seth never flinched. “My problem is, she came here with me. I’m not about to let her go wandering off in the dark with another guy.”

Travis turned his anger on me. “You came here with a *date*? Were you planning to mention this?”

It was easy for me to match his anger. Neither of these guys owned me. “I came here with *my sister*!” I snapped and turned to walk away.

Travis grabbed hold of my wrist. “Where are you going?”

“Let go of her,” Seth said, eyes blazing in the fading light. But his

warning was unnecessary because I'd already wrenched my arm free.

"I'm going," I said, glaring at each of them in turn, "to find some people to hang out with who aren't acting like tools!"

Someone started a bonfire and I plopped myself down in front of it. The sun had gone down, and since I couldn't put my tank top back on I was starting to get chilly. I was still so angry that when I felt a hand come down on my shoulder I nearly knocked my sister's block off before I realized it was her. "Sorry," I mumbled, but Angela was far too excited about something to care.

"I can't believe that just happened!" she exclaimed.

"What happened?"

"I totally get it now."

"What are you babbling about? And why are you talking to me? We're in public."

"Ellie, Seth *likes* you!"

Yeah, likes to torment me.

"I mean, I knew something was up this afternoon when he was all flirty, and now it makes so much sense. He was trying to make you jealous! And it totally worked, because you came tonight."

"I came tonight because Seth is a psychopath and I didn't trust him alone with you."

Angela rolled her eyes. "It's okay to admit that you like him."

I glared at her, but she dismissed it. "Really," she said. "I'm excited for you. I've always wanted a sister."

I frowned. "You've always *had* a sister."

"You know what I mean," Angela said, waving me off again. "A real sister. One who dresses like a girl and crushes on boys."

"I'm not crushing—"

"I'm so proud of you, Ellie. You came to your first party tonight and even though you bloodied some guy—which, just so you know, isn't very cool—you weren't the total social reject I thought you'd be. You even had two guys fighting over you. Hot guys!"

"Angela."

"That was brilliant of you, going off with that guy. I thought Seth was going to kill someone, that's how jealous he was."

"He probably just wanted to kill someone," I pointed out, but Angela wasn't listening to me.

"And then walking away from them both like you did? They're probably going crazy over it. Now we just have to figure out which one you want to go for."

"Angela."

"I'd go for Seth if I were you. Body builders like that other guy usually care more about working out than they do about their

girlfriends."

"Angela."

"But still, he's a hottie, and if you really like him…"

"Angela!" I finally broke through to her.

"What?"

"I don't want either of them."

"You *need* a boyfriend, Ellie. We can't waste this miraculous opportunity. You might not ever get another chance."

"Angela, I'm telling you, Seth is crazy."

"Well, yeah," Angela agreed, frowning. "Him having a crush on you does make one question his mental capacity. But, hey, a freak for a freak. It's perfect! We just need to come up with a plan. I'll bet we could make him your boyfriend by the end of the night."

"Angela. I'll speak slowly so you can understand. I don't want Seth for a boyfriend. The guy is unhinged."

"Hmm." Angela said, thinking way too hard on the matter. "So you want the other guy?"

I sighed. Angela is as crazy as Seth in her own way.

"Who was he anyway?" she asked me.

"Who?"

"The guy you were with."

"I don't know. Some senior, I assume. This is your party. Your friends. Don't you know who he is?"

"I don't think I've ever seen him before. What's his name?"

"Travis," I said.

"Travis what?"

"I don't know, just Travis."

"You didn't ask him his last name?"

I rolled my eyes. "Seth picked a fight before I could ask him anything."

"And you don't think that's romantic?" Angela asked with a dreamy sigh. "Are you sure you don't want to go for Seth?"

I glared at her.

"All right, fine. Travis it is. I'm going to see if I can find out more about him. You stay here and keep being sociable. If you can flirt with anyone else, even better."

I let out a huge breath of relief when she finally left, but I knew she'd be back. Somehow I'd unleashed a monster.

Dave and a couple other guys were sitting on the other side of the fire. I thought of Angela's request to be sociable, but decided to stay put. I chose instead to chug the rest of the Dr. Pepper Seth had given me and relish the fact that I was alone.

I only got to enjoy about ten minutes of peace before I felt someone lurking behind me. "Go away," I warned.

“Ellie.” Seth ignored my request and sat down right beside me. “I know you’re mad, but you don’t understand. Do you have any idea what that guy was trying to do?”

“Talk to me?” I snapped.

“Ellie,” he said again. His voice was a whisper so soft it made my heart flutter. I looked up without thinking and met his eyes. Big mistake. He managed to trap me in some sort of spell, and when he reached up to brush the backs of his fingers down my face I let him. My eyes flittered shut at his touch. “You’re so innocent.”

I shivered, and I don’t think it was from being cold.

“You need me.”

My eyes snapped open, his words clearing the fog in my brain. “Did you not happen to see what I did to Kowalski?” I asked. “I’m not helpless.”

Seth pulled his hand back. “I never doubted your ability to throw a punch,” he said with a laugh. “I’m sure you can more than hold your own on a court. But guys like your friend from earlier? They’re playing a whole different kind of game. One you don’t have the slightest clue how to play.”

I had to turn my face away from Seth even though in the darkness he couldn’t have seen my blush.

“Trust me,” Seth went on. “Your boy, Travis? He was a pro. He would have taken you on that walk, gotten you alone, and you wouldn’t have been able to do a thing about it. If you think I scared you earlier—”

“Stop,” I said, still unable to look at him. “Just stop. I get it.” And I did. I hated how much sense he was making. “I may be innocent, but I’m not stupid. I’ll figure it out.”

“I could help you.”

“I don’t want your help.”

“Don’t be mad.”

“Go away.”

I turned my body even further from him and we sat in silence until a slight breeze picked up and I shivered again. I felt Seth’s hand come down lightly on my shoulder. He brushed his fingers down the length of my arm, feeling the goose bumps on my skin. “You’re cold,” he said.

I shrugged away from his touch. “I’m fine.”

Seth handed me something. After looking down at it I turned to face him. He’d taken off the button up he’d been wearing and was now in nothing but the white tank top he’d had under it.

“I don’t need your shirt.”

He thrust it at me again, rolling his eyes. “Just take it.”

I didn’t want to take it, but I really was kind of cold, and I was

really, really tired of feeling naked. The sleeves engulfed my hands and I had to push them back in order to fasten the buttons, but I was grateful to be covered.

I was about to say thank you when Seth let out a deep breath. “Ellie, Ellie, Ellie.” He sighed, shaking his head slowly. “What am I going to do with you?”

“What?” I asked, drawing my knees up to my chest self-consciously.

“Nothing,” he said. “It’s just…” He reached up to fix my collar. His hands lingered longer than necessary. I pulled back a little and he smiled. “As much as I could kill that guy Travis, I really can’t blame him. The sight of you wearing my shirt makes me want to take you for a long walk up a deserted beach myself.”

I jumped to my feet, ripped the shirt over my head and threw it at Seth. I hoped I kicked up sand in his face as I stalked off.

“Angela!” I shrieked.

Angela wasn’t standing far away. “Oh my gosh, Ellie, I saw you talking with Seth. You should have seen the two of you! I don’t care what you say, you guys are meant to be!”

Rachel and Brooke beside her were nodding vigorously. “You are so lucky,” Brooke said. “He is so gorgeous.”

“And he gave you his shirt?” Rachel squealed. “So romantic!”

All I said was, “I’m ready to go.”

Angela frowned. “We still have half an hour before we have to go. I thought you were having a good time.”

“Now!”

My head was pounding when I woke up the next morning. Probably because after the party I dreamt all night long. Some of the dreams were nightmares, but some of them… well… let's just say I remembered what Seth's lips felt like against my neck and how his fingers could raise goose bumps on my skin a little too well.

The nightmares were comforting because they were so straightforward, but the good dreams confused me. I didn't know what to think of Seth, but one thing was certain: there was no way in H-E-double-hockey-sticks that I was going to spend the day alone with him. My car was just going to have to wait.

I went downstairs to try and explain the bad news to my mom, but I stopped in the hall when I heard her and Angela talking about me. "I don't get it," Angela said. "They were just talking and Seth was being so sweet. Then all the sudden Ellie freaked out and made us leave. She didn't say a single word the whole way home."

"Well Ang, sweetheart,"—I could hear the sympathy in Mom's voice as well as a sense of astonishment—"she was probably just scared."

Thank you! I was so relieved that someone else understood how creepy Seth is. But then mom said, "Ellie's not used to boys the way you are."

"All she ever hangs out with is boys!"

"But none of them has ever paid her that kind of attention before. The J's, they're good kids, but they treat Ellie like one of them. Could you see any of them asking her on a date, or trying to kiss her?"

Angela snorted. "Ew."

I couldn't believe my mom and my sister were having this conversation about me, but at least Angela and I were on the same page with that thought. Going out with the J's? Ew, ew, and ew!

Mom continued, "So if Seth really likes Ellie, can't you understand how she might be very confused right now? Puberty is a very difficult thing. Not everyone adapts to it as naturally as you did."

"Gross, mom, I can't believe you just said the word puberty."

"Well, what else am I supposed to call it?"

"Um, nothing. We are so done with this conversation. And you know what? Maybe you shouldn't say anything to Ellie. I'll help her

with Seth."

Hearing a chair scoot back from the table, I started to creep back up the stairs, but I still heard my mom's stern reply. "Angela?"

"What?"

"You leave your sister alone."

"But Mom, you didn't see her. She *needs* help."

"Stay out of it!" Mom said again. "I'm sure she'll ask for your advice when she's ready for it."

Ha! And monkeys might fly out of my butt, too.

I waited in my room until I heard Angela turn the shower on in the bathroom and then went downstairs to face my mom. Thankfully she didn't say anything when I walked in the kitchen. She just sipped her coffee while I grabbed a bowl of Cocoa Puffs. When she finally did speak she didn't breathe a word about the party.

"So, any idea what kind of car you want?"

"I doubt I'll have many options with only four thousand dollars to work with," I said, finding the perfect segue into cancelling my plans for the day without bringing up Seth. "Maybe I should just wait until the end of the summer when I've saved a little more."

"You'd be surprised, Ellie. Remember Genevieve from the hotel? Her husband Frank runs the Livonia Ford dealership and he said he had a few great deals right now. I told him how hard you've been saving and he's excited for you to come down today."

Crap! Not that I'm not grateful for my mom's attempt to get me a deal despite our family's lack of motor vehicle connections—Mom doesn't work for a car company either, as helpful as that would be right now. She's the front desk manager for the Dearborn Marriott Hotel—but how was I supposed to get out of going now?

"Hey Mom? If you know this guy, why don't you go with me today?"

My mom studied me then in a way I'd never seen her look at me before. It took her a long time to reply. "Oh, honey," she said, sighing. "That is going to take all day and I've got a whole list of things I need to get done."

"But I'm just a kid. Don't you think I should have an adult with me for something like buying a car?"

"You're paying cash, so you won't need me to sign any papers and you know more about cars than I do."

"But—"

"You're about to turn sixteen. It's time for you to start taking on some grown-up responsibility. Especially if you're going to own your own car." She paused to smile at me over her coffee mug. "I trust you to make a good decision."

Ugh, she was going for the whole guilt trip thing. She'd been

lecturing me on the responsibilities of having my own car for weeks. If I told her I couldn't handle this on my own, she'd probably tell me I couldn't get one.

Well, if she could go for the guilt trip, then so could I. "Don't you want to go with me, Mom? It's for my sweet sixteen. We could go just the two of us. Spend the day together. Get some lunch? We don't do that very often."

The truth is, offering some quality girl time just the two of us was pretty underhanded of me. My mom's a lot more like Angela, and it's no secret that I'm my dad's daughter. I felt a little bad manipulating her, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

My mom got really quiet as she set down her coffee cup. I had her! She was going to give in—I could see it in her eyes. When she finally spoke I waited for her to say okay, but what came out of her mouth was, "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I just can't today."

That's when I realized what she was doing. "She totally got to you!" I accused.

"What?" My mom sounded startled.

"I'm going to *kill* her!"

"Kill who?"

"Angela!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. "That little bi—"I caught myself in time to not get grounded. "Brat!"

"Ellie! What is the matter with you?"

I couldn't help getting angry at my mom. "You're blowing me off because you want me to have to go with Seth!"

Mom couldn't find a reply—I'd hit the nail right on the head.

"You're as bad as she is!" I yelled.

"Ellie, stop shouting," my mom said, her voice becoming stern. "It was very nice of Seth to offer to help you. He's brand new in town and just wants to spend time with the only people his age that he knows. It would be very rude to cancel on him."

"Oh, please. You don't care about offending anyone. You just want your freak daughter to be more like your perfect one."

"Eleanor Elizabeth Westley!"

I'd crossed a line with that one, but I didn't take it back. I folded my arms stubbornly, falling into a staring match with my mom. I waited for her to start in on me, waited for the lecture and the grounding that I deserved, and was really surprised when I got compassion. "Angela's not perfect, sweetheart, and you're not a freak."

My mom reached across the table and put her hand on my arm. She had that proud-parent look in her eyes. "You are a smart, strong, beautiful young woman, Ellie," she said. "It was only a matter of time before boys started realizing that. And now that they are, you're going to have to learn how to deal with it."

"Oh, geez!" I sank back in my chair, more uncomfortable than I'd ever been in my life. This was *not* the lecture I'd been expecting.

"I'm serious, Ellie."

"So am I. I'll just wait for dad to get a car."

"You know how awful your dad felt about having to leave this weekend. He'll feel even worse if you don't get your car before your birthday. He knows how much you've been looking forward to it."

"It'll be fine Mom. One week won't kill me."

"It's more than that, Ellie. Your father and I know you're bummed about your friends being gone this summer and missing your birthday."

"I'll throw her a party," Angela said, coming into the kitchen. "The Fourth is this Friday, which doesn't give me much time, but I'll bet I can pull it off."

My mom looked at me hopefully and sighed when I shook my head. "This is your sixteenth birthday," she said. "It should be special."

That struck a nerve, no matter how hard I was trying not to let it. "Well, there's no way a stupid party full of Angela's friends is going to make it special," I snapped.

"Ingrate," Angela muttered. I glared at her.

"Forget it, it's just a stupid birthday."

"Ellie," my mom said, frowning.

The pity in her voice threw my temper over the edge. "I don't want a party!" I yelled. "And I'm not going today!"

"What do you mean you're not going today?" Angela gasped in a panic. "You have to! Ellie, this is basically like a date. I even called Rachel and Brooke to come help you get ready. They'll be here in like fifteen minutes."

"It is *not* a date."

"You heard Seth last night on the way home. He's really looking forward to today. You can't cancel on him, you'll break his heart."

"I'll bet I will. I'm not going anywhere alone with Seth."

"So take your sister with you," Mom suggested quickly.

"On her *date*?" Angela asked, appalled.

But my mom had a point. Maybe there was a chance I could still get my car today. When Angela was there, Seth did a decent job of controlling his creep factor.

"It's not a date," I said again. "And if you don't go, I don't go."

Angela stared at me incredulously. "You're such a freak."

"Fine. I guess I'm not going," I said, turning to leave the room.

I got half way up the stairs before Angela came stomping up them behind me saying, "All right, I'll go. You big baby."

I locked myself in the bathroom before she could start giving me wardrobe tips.

Luckily, Rachel and Brooke did not show up to give me a first date makeover, but there was an outfit laid out on my bed when I got out of the shower. I didn't want to give Angela the satisfaction of winning, but I didn't want to fight with her either. I needed her to be in a good mood to keep Seth distracted.

I could tell she tried to be reasonable. She'd laid out a pair of my own jeans—probably just because I'm too tall to wear any of hers—so I put on the shirt without too much argument even though it was pink, had a strap around the back of my neck instead of sleeves, and seemed to be missing part of the back.

I came downstairs expecting her to complain about my ponytail but she just looked at me kind of startled and said, "Wow. You actually look kind of cute. Man, I'm good."

"Is this really necessary?" I asked, pointing at the shirt. I looked at the T-shirt she was wearing and frowned. "How come you get to wear sleeves?"

"Ellie, if you're going to make me chaperone on your date, then you at least have to look like you tried to be cuter than me."

"Would you give it a rest already? This is not a date!" But two seconds later the doorbell rang and we answered it to find Seth standing there with roses in his hand. Roses! Angela gave me a very pointed look. I ignored it.

Seth's eyes raked over me from head to toe, lingering curiously on the shirt I was wearing. When his gaze finally made it back to my face, he laughed at my scowl and held out the flowers. "For the almost birthday girl."

I didn't realize I was standing there like an idiot gaping open-mouthed at the flowers until Angela elbowed me. Seth had to actually take my hand and put the flowers in it.

"Um, thanks," I said, but for some reason it sounded like a question.

Seth held out his arm to me and asked, "You ready to go?"

I looked down at his waiting arm and then at Angela. She was giving me a pleading look, begging me to go without her. "I'm ready," I said, not taking my eyes off my sister. "You ready, Ang?"

Angela rolled her eyes. With an irritated sigh she said, "I just have to get my purse," and stalked up the stairs.

"Your sister's coming?"

I looked back at Seth and shrugged.

Seth's face was careful. "I thought it was just going to be us," he said evenly.

"She wanted to come," I lied.

Seth studied me for a moment, his gaze intense. "You could tell her no."

Thankfully Angela came back then. *Huh. Never thought I'd say that.*

“Okay, I’m ready,” Angela said, glossing her lips as she stopped in front of us.

“Great,” Seth said with a big smile her direction. But as he walked out the door he pointed to her face and said, “You smeared a little.”

When I headed for the back of Seth’s car, he grabbed me by the shoulders, steered me around the car, and plopped me in the front seat. “Stay,” he ordered me and then hurried to slip behind the wheel.

After buckling his seatbelt, Seth brushed his fingers down the length of my arm and pulled my hand into his. I stared down, slightly baffled at how he’d intertwined our fingers—I’d never held hands with a guy before.

“So.” His voice startled me. I looked up and was met with a smile so warm I couldn’t pull my hand away. “I was thinking we could—”

“It’s too bad you won’t be coming home with a car like this today, Ellie,” Angela, who’d finally stopped fussing over her lips, interrupted as she climbed into the back seat. At the sound of her voice I ripped my hand from Seth’s.

Seth started the car, patiently sending Angela a smile in the rearview mirror. “You like it?” he asked her.

I could still feel the warmth of Seth’s hand on mine. My skin tingled where he’d held it, as if it craved more. Why did the first boy to ever like me have to be crazy? And I knew he was crazy because as he chatted with my sister about the perks of driving a BMW, his voice was perfectly friendly but he gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles.

“Ellie?”

I looked up. Seth and Angela were both waiting for me to say something.

“What do you think?” Angela asked again.

“I wouldn’t buy one of these things even if I had a zillion dollars.”

“That’s not what we were talking about,” Angela said. “And don’t be rude.”

“Too rich for your blood?” Seth asked me curiously.

“Try too foreign. This is *Detroit*. Motor City? Ford, Chevy, GM?”

Seth shrugged. “At least with this car I won’t have to replace the transmission every three years.”

Oh!

Angela saw my eyes narrow and quickly stepped in. “Ellie, we were talking about Patty’s.”

“What?”

“Do you want to go to Patty’s before we start looking for cars? I was just telling Seth how much you love it.”

Patty’s is this old-school diner where they have the absolute best milk shakes on the planet. I didn’t really want to prolong this day any

more than necessary, but some things are worth it. “Fine,” I grumbled.

“See?” Angela beamed triumphantly at Seth. “I told you she can’t ever resist Patty’s.”

Seth visibly relaxed in his chair. “What other things can’t she resist?” he asked Angela, grinning devilishly at me.

“Tickets to a Red Wings game,” Angela said automatically. “And guys who play the guitar.”

I gasped. “Angela! *Shut up!*” I didn’t realize she knew that about me.

“Really?” Seth laughed and I turned a very deep shade of red. “Musicians, huh?”

“Do you play?” Angela asked Seth hopefully.

I prayed Seth wouldn’t realize Angela was trying to play matchmaker, but I also suspected there wasn’t much Seth missed.

“I could learn,” he said.

Patty's was pretty crowded. When we walked in, I noticed a bunch of the guys I play against at the park sitting in the big corner booth. While Seth and Angela went to talk to the hostess I strolled over to my friends. "Thanks for the invite, jerks," I teased.

Several guys choked on the food in their mouths when they looked up. I didn't know what that was about until Dave laughed and said, "What's with the makeover, Westley?"

I looked around at the group of stunned guys and remembered I was wearing the clothes Angela had picked out. I groaned and made Dave shove over for me. "Don't start," I said as I stole a few of his fries. Since everyone was still staring at me I added, "I lost a bet."

Yeah, I know, I'm a liar. But it was easier than explaining the truth.

"Where were you this morning?" Dave asked. "Kowalski was saying you're afraid to play against him now since you know he's going to take you down for breaking his nose."

I snorted. "He can try. I'm not afraid of that dillweed. I was just busy."

"*Busy?*" one of the guys asked, and several of them snickered.

I followed their gazes and found Seth standing behind me. "Our table's ready, Ellie," Seth said without taking his eyes off of Dave sitting next to me.

"*Really* busy," someone else teased, igniting more laughter.

"Shut it, perverts," I snapped. Then, with a sigh, I stole a few more of Dave's fries. "Tell Kowalski I'll be there Monday morning in case he wants to get beat again."

When I stood up I heard someone say, "I didn't know Westley liked 'em pretty." Then someone else muttered, "I didn't know Westley liked 'em at all."

I whirled around, ready to knock someone the freak out, but Seth grabbed me firmly around my waist. "Whoa there, tiger," he said, laughing as he dragged me to our table.

Somehow, though I'd fully intended on sitting next to Angela, Seth ushered me into the booth across from her and sat down next to me before I could protest. Angela smiled at me really big from across the table. Smugly. I was about to kick her when Seth distracted me with a

question. “So that guy you were just sitting by, he was the same one you were joking with at the party last night, right?”

“And?”

“You two seem really… chummy.”

I knew what he was getting at, and even though that definitely wasn’t the case with Dave and me, I didn’t see the harm in letting Seth believe it was. “Maybe we are.”

“What guy?” Angela asked, startled.

“He means Dave.”

“Dave Holcomb?”

I nodded and Angela laughed. “Yeah, right. Ellie, don’t tease poor Seth like that.”

Poor Seth. Right.

“Dave Holcomb,” Angela said, “is one of the most popular guys in Ellie’s class. He could get any junior girl he wanted. And half the seniors too probably.”

Angela explained all this as if it should be a comfort to Seth, and really she was right—Dave and I are friends, but he’d never ask me to prom if you know what I mean—but Seth didn’t seem very thrilled with the idea of me being “chummy” with such a sought-after guy.

It got quiet for a minute and we all sighed with relief at the sight of our server. “What can I get you guys?” the lady asked.

Seth gestured to me, so I said, “I’d like a chocolate peanut butter shake please.”

The woman nodded, then moved her eyes to Seth. “How about an Oreo cookie shake,” he said. Then he looked at me and added, “We’d better get a basket of fries as well.”

“And for you?” the server asked my sister.

“Oh, nothing for me thanks.”

“You sure?” Seth asked while I said, “Nothing? You were the one who insisted we come here.”

“I’m sure,” Angela said. “I’ll be fine with my water.”

Something was up with Angela. She doesn’t exactly pack away ice cream the way I do, but I’d never seen her sit down in a restaurant and not at least order a Diet Coke.

A few minutes later I figured out what she was up to when I saw Rachel and Brooke walk into the restaurant. Angela looked up just as her friends spotted us. She tried to look surprised, but she’s not that good an actress. “Oh, hey! What are you guys doing here?” she asked innocently when Rachel and Brooke slid into the booth beside her.

“Yes,” Seth said, that cool control back in his voice. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

Rachel and Brooke didn’t answer Seth’s question. Instead they started cooing at Seth and me like we were a couple of puppies in a

pet shop window. “Angela was right. You guys are just the cutest!” Brooke whined.

“Totally adorable,” Rachel agreed. “I’m so glad you’re together now. You know Seth, Ellie’s never had a boyfriend before so you’d better take good care of her.”

I didn’t have time to correct Rachel of my relationship status because Seth, of all people, said, “Oh, we’re not together.” But then he had to go and ruin it by throwing his arm around my shoulders and adding, “Don’t worry your pretty heads about it, though. I have special plans for our little Ellie here.”

“Special plans?” I muttered. “Could you be any creepier?”

Seth ignored me. “I promise you,” he said to my sister and her friends as he pulled me tight against him. “I’ll take extra care with her.”

The blond brigade all sighed and started scrambling to their feet. “Well, we’ll leave you to it then,” Rachel said. “Have fun you guys!”

“Angela!” I hissed when my sister stood up. I *knew* she was going to ditch me! “Where do you think you’re going?”

“You guys don’t really need me to come today,” she said with a big innocent smile. “Do you Seth?”

Seth gave my sister his first sincere grin of the day. “It’ll be difficult, but I’m sure we’ll manage.”

“You told mom you were coming with me today,” I said, starting to panic. “You promised!”

Angela smiled down at me very condescendingly. “Trust me, Ellie, this is for your own good.”

“But I wore your stupid shirt!”

“Totally cute, by the way,” Brooke said. “You should wear pink more often.”

I glared at my sister. “I hate you!”

“You won’t later,” Angela said, which caused Seth to laugh. Angela winked at him and then ran off with her friends, leaving me trapped in a booth with my psycho neighbor who still had his arm around me.

“Well,” Seth said after my sister was long gone and our shakes were in front of us. “This is a pleasant turn of events. You know? Your sister’s not as bad as I used to think.”

“Yeah, she’s worse. Stupid traitor.”

“Ellie, quit being ridiculous. She did what she did because she cares about you.”

“Right,” I sneered.

Seth’s entire demeanor was completely different now. He was much happier and way too comfortable. “Angela just sees what you can’t for some reason,” he said.

“And what’s that?”

The corner of Seth's mouth pulled up into a smirk and he turned, angling his body toward mine in the booth. "That it's only a matter of time before I get what I want."

Seth looked as if he were the one caught in a spell this time. His gaze was so intense that I shrank back as far as the booth would allow. It wasn't far enough. He cupped my jaw in his fingers, brushing his thumb across my lips.

"Get your hands off me." I was surprised when I actually sounded dangerous because that warm tingly feeling I got whenever Seth touched me was trying to convince me I didn't really want him to stop.

Seth sat back with a sigh and pushed my shake a little closer to me. "You should drink that. It'll make you feel better."

"Actually, going home would make me feel better."

"Won't you at least try to have a nice time today?"

"If you would at least try to act like a normal person, I might."

Something flashed in Seth's eyes. "And what's normal?" he snapped. "Breaking people's noses and having to be forced to wear clothes that actually fit? You're not exactly one to talk, you know."

I was so taken aback by his outburst that the only thing I could think to do was take a sip of milkshake. A really long sip.

I knew Seth was watching me. After what he'd said, I couldn't help feeling completely self-conscious. I shrank back wrapping my arms around myself, my temper completely depleting. *Stupid Angela and her stupid shirt.*

"You look very nice today," Seth offered suddenly. I glared at him, hating that he could read me so easily. His face filled with regret. "I'm sorry—I lose my temper sometimes."

I didn't say anything, even though I probably should have apologized to him too.

"Let's not fight," Seth said, attempting to make amends again.

"Whatever," I grumbled and then did the only thing there was left to do—I reached for the basket of fries sitting between us and dunked a really long one into my shake. After shoving the fry in my mouth I noticed that Seth was watching me with that completely amused sparkle back in his eyes.

Once I got to the car dealership I started to relax. I was buying my first car, after all. Even with Seth around I was kind of excited. Plus, it was easier to deal with Seth when I wasn't trapped in a small booth with him anymore.

"So," Seth said as we wandered over to the used half of the dealership. "Did you have anything specific in mind?" Seth raised his eyebrows and opened the driver's side door to an F150. "You strike

me as the truck type."

I tried not to smile at that and climbed behind the wheel. Seth joined me in the cab and watched me as I tried to get a feel for the truck. "You know what's good about a truck," he said eventually.

"Plenty of room to haul all your gear when you go camping."

"I suppose that's true, though I wouldn't really know. I've never been camping."

"Never?" I asked.

"Nope." Seth slid across the cab toward me. "I have, however, been to the drive in." He slipped his arm around my shoulders with a grin. "Bench seats are nice, don't you think?"

I swallowed hard and hopped out of the car so fast that Seth fell over. "No trucks, then?" he called as I slammed the door in his face.

I was already looking in the windows of a Focus when Seth caught up to me. I took specific note of the bucket seats up front and then climbed behind the wheel. Seth settled himself into the passenger seat.

"This would get much better gas mileage," I said.

"It's kind of small, though." Seth wiggled uncomfortably and then scooted his chair back.

I glanced around the car and tried to picture the J's all cramming into the tiny car. "True," I agreed. "Let's go try that one over there."

Seth followed me to a Fusion. As I got comfy behind the wheel, he didn't say anything, except "much better."

"Definitely," I agreed, glancing over my shoulder. "And way more room in the back seat."

Seth turned to look at me with his eyebrows cocked way up. "Ellie," he said, laughing. "You just freaked out over the idea of a bench. I don't think you have to worry about needing a spacious backseat."

When I caught his meaning I blushed. Why are all guys such horn dogs? "I didn't mean I plan on making out back there. I was simply thinking of the J's. They fully expect me to drive their sorry butts to school in the fall."

"Yeah, and they fully expect you to get busy in the back seat with them too."

"Shut up, they do not."

"Oh, yes they do. They're guys. And you're not. It's that simple."

"They're my best friends. We've grown up in the same neighborhood together our whole lives. I guarantee none of them is interested in me."

"Not that they'd tell you. They're probably afraid of getting their butts handed to them on a spoon. But that doesn't mean they aren't thinking about it. At least one of them is. My money's on Josh."

"What makes you say that? You've never even met the guy."

"Yeah, but who else would spend so much time playing something

as lame as *Skateboard Pro 2000*? I hate to break it to you, but the guy's not obsessed with beating your score. He's hoping you'll get bored and jump his bones."

"First of all, gross. And second of all, *Skateboard Pro 2000* is not lame."

"I'm afraid it is, Ellie. In fact,"—Seth shrugged apologetically —"your entire video game collection pretty much sucks. *Grand Theft Auto, MX vs. ATV Racing, Madden Football*? Where's the action? The suspense? The danger?"

"I play *Halo*," I said defensively.

"*Halo*?" Seth laughed. "Give me a break!"

"What's wrong with *Halo*?"

"Um, it's boring. You just run around and shoot at anything that moves. Your sister could probably beat that game."

"Oh yeah, and what's your favorite video game?"

"*Assassin's Creed*."

"*Assassin's Creed*," I repeated dryly. *Of course it is.* I shouldn't have asked. "Excuse me if I find murdering people disturbing."

"It's not about killing people, it's about the challenge. You can't just go in and blow off everyone's heads. You get points for stealth and creativity. Blowing up a bunch of aliens is whatever, but pulling off the perfect murder? That's an accomplishment."

"No. It's creepy is what it is."

"It's not that creepy," Seth argued. "Otherwise why are there so many crime novels and cop shows out there? People are fascinated with murder."

This conversation had taken a turn for the weird really fast, but it was more of a conversation than Seth and I had ever had. Well, a conversation that wasn't about him trying to seduce me, anyway. That's why I encouraged him to keep talking.

"People aren't fascinated with murder," I said, knowing he'd argue.

"Sure they are. Take those two girls your parents were talking about at dinner for example. The media is fixed on them right now. This city is just waiting for another girl to end up dead because there's nothing like a good serial killer to liven up the conversation around the water cooler."

He had to bring *that* up. Suddenly Heather Monroe's face was flashing through my brain and I shuddered violently. "It's not a serial killer," I said. "And come to think of it, I'm really more of an SUV type of girl."

Seth scrambled to catch up to me after I jumped out of the car. I'd hurried off so fast I wasn't even sure what kind of car I'd climbed into next.

"You don't think those two deaths were related?" Seth asked me.

"The cops already said they weren't."

"Then they're lying."

"What makes you so sure?" I didn't think I wanted to know Seth's answer, but at the same time I did. I had to know if there was really a serial killer out there snatching girls who looked exactly like me.

"It's the number of stab wounds," Seth said matter-of-factly. "Both girls were stabbed over thirty times."

I suddenly felt sick. "Could be coincidence."

Seth shook his head. "For most people who commit crimes like that it's about the pleasure they get while the victim is still alive. The murder is just a means of cleaning up. But for serial killers, it's about the killing. No way two different guys would attack two different girls who happen to look so much alike *and* stab them so excessively. If they had been regular murders, the attackers would have wanted to kill the girls as quickly as possible. Even if the guys had no idea how to properly use a knife, there are way too many vulnerable places on the human body to miss them all. Five or six stab wounds and chances are the girls would be dead. Why would two different guys continue to chop up someone who's already dead?"

I was ready for this conversation to be over, but I couldn't get a word in. Something had taken over Seth. I'd never seen him so animated.

"Not only are the two killings definitely related," he continued, "but it's a game for this guy. The second girl was stabbed seven times more than the first. My guess is he was trying to keep her alive as long as possible. See if he could out-do his last death. You watch. I'll bet you that there is another murder tonight, and the number of stab wounds will be close to or higher than the last."

I gaped at Seth, but he just kept going.

"I'd also bet the killer is annoyed that the two killings haven't been connected. He's got to be proud of his work—that many stab wounds is really quite impressive. I bet this time he'll leave some kind of message or calling card so that they have to rule it a serial killing."

Seth was so caught up in his theory that he hadn't noticed just how excited he'd become, or how absolutely crazy he sounded. He also didn't seem to realize that I hadn't said a word for minutes and was on the verge of throwing up.

He was startled back to reality when I flung the car door open. I heard him call my name but I didn't answer. I slammed the door shut and headed quickly for the office.

"Ellie, what's wrong? Where are you going?" Seth asked when he'd caught up to me.

When I didn't answer him he grabbed my wrist and spun me toward him. "What's the matter with you?"

“Let go of me!” I demanded.

“Not until you tell me what your problem is.”

“You!” I shouted. “You’re crazy! Sick!”

I could see the anger flash through Seth’s eyes the same way it had back in the restaurant, but he let go of my arm.

“There is something seriously wrong with you,” I said. “I’m going home.”

I got about two steps before Seth grabbed my wrist again. “Ellie, wait.”

He sounded more hurt than angry now, but I didn’t care. “Let go of me right now or I’ll start screaming. My mom knows the manager of this place. He’ll have you arrested quicker than you can say psychopath!”

Seth let go without another word. I didn’t look back, but I could feel him watching me as I stormed into the car dealership.

My mom didn't ask me about it when I called her from the car dealership and asked her to come pick me up, but I'm sure my face said enough. When she got there I simply told her I didn't find anything I liked and we drove home in complete silence. After that I grabbed a bunch of snacks and locked myself in my bedroom for the rest of the day.

I'm sure my mom and Angela probably thought that Seth and I had gotten into some huge lover's spat or something, but I didn't care. I didn't want to talk about Seth to them. It's not like they would have listened or believed me if I'd told them the truth. No. I'd just be poor little naive Ellie nervous because a boy actually liked her for once.

When the J's called me later that evening I couldn't stop thinking about what Seth said, so when Josh finally got hold of the phone I asked him if it was true. Well, sort of. "Hey, is my video game collection lame?"

Josh's answer came so easily it startled me. "Of course. Why?"

"No. For real."

"Yeah. For real, Westley, it's pretty lame. You don't even have *Call of Duty* or anything."

"So then you don't like *Skateboard Pro 2000*?"

"Ugh, it's the worst. I wish I could punk that stupid sport for existing and forcing us all to be subject to such lameness."

I gripped the phone receiver so tight in my hand I half expected it to crumble to pieces. Just because Josh hated *Skateboard Pro 2000* didn't mean Seth was right. It just meant I needed to expand my X-box horizons.

"If my game collection sucks so bad, why do you always insist on hanging out at *my* house?"

"Hey guys," Josh called out. "Ellie wants to know why we hang out at her house so much."

It was quiet for a second, and then Jesse and Jack sung out in unison. "Angela!"

"My sister?"

"Duh," Josh said. "She may be wretched, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't mind catching her getting out of the shower one of these

days."

"You're sick," I teased, but I felt much better. Clearly Seth was wrong about the J's. And if he was wrong about them, then maybe that meant he was wrong about the murders too.

"Anyway, we gotta go," Josh said. "Wish you could be here, Westley. You'd seriously love it."

"Yeah!" Jesse yelled in the background. "We're gonna have to figure out a way to make you grow a pair by next summer!"

Well. They may have been a bunch of tools, but at least they were consistent.

That tincy bit of normalcy made me relax a little, but I still kept a close eye on the house across the street. Seth's car was still gone. He'd waited around at the dealership sulking until my mom got there, but he didn't follow us home and hadn't come back yet.

When Seth didn't come home by midnight I started to feel bad. I hadn't exactly been nice to him and he was obviously upset about it. I waited all night—couldn't sleep. I even quit peeking out the window after a while and actually climbed out onto the roof needing some air.

Around 4:30 a.m. a pair of headlights came shining down the street and I dove back into my room. I shut off my TV and even covered my alarm clock so that my room was pitch black. Then, through the tiniest crack in my window shade, I watched Seth climb out of his car. He seemed exactly the same as he always did as he went inside. The light turned on in his room for a few minutes and then it went back off. Nothing to see. No strange behavior. And now that he was home, I realized it was nearly dawn and was able to finally pass out.

"Ellie, you're still alive, right?"

I woke up to the sound of Angela's voice, which is always unpleasant, but it wasn't as antagonistic as it normally is. I groaned something that sounded close to, "Go away."

"No can do, little sis. Mom told me not to bother you, but if you stay in your room much longer she's going to come in here, and trust me you don't want her to. She keeps using the word puberty."

I grumbled something completely unintelligible this time.

"If it helps, I brought breakfast—double fudge chunk."

I sat up and Angela climbed onto my bed holding two pints of ice cream and two spoons. When I tried to take one from her she pulled it back. "This doesn't come without a price," she said. "You are going to tell me exactly what happened yesterday."

I rolled my eyes and snatched the ice cream from my sister's hands. She sighed, took a bite out of her own pint and then asked, "Seriously Ellie, what went wrong? Because Seth likes you. I mean he really, *really* likes you. He's come over three times today asking for you. He

even brought you new roses because you forgot to put the ones he gave you yesterday in water and they wilted. Look, see?" Angela pointed to the bouquet on my dresser. "These ones came already in a vase."

"He's come over three times? What time is it?"

"Almost one. I tried to ask him what happened but he wouldn't tell me. Ellie, he looked upset."

"Upset-angry?" I asked.

"More like upset-frustrated," Angela said. "I don't think Seth gets angry."

"Ha! Angela you don't understand. He's not the same around you as he is around me. He has problems. He's seriously crazy. The way he looks at me, and touches me all the time..." I felt my face heat up. The blushing was definitely not going to help my case any. "It's like he's restraining himself from hog-tying me and dragging me out to the woods."

"Come on, Ellie, that's a little harsh, don't you think? He's just being a guy. You've just never had a guy interested in you before."

"No, that's not it! Listen, when we were at the car dealership he started talking about those girls. But he wasn't just talking about them. It was like he was obsessed with them. Like he understood what happened because his brain works the same way."

"What girls?"

"Those two girls that died. The ones mom was talking about with his aunt at dinner."

"Oh, them. Actually it's three girls now. And they're saying it's definitely a serial killer."

"What?"

"It's been all over the news today," Angela said.

As I turned on my TV Angela frowned. "Wait. Are you saying you think Seth's brain works like a fifteen-year-old girl?" she asked.

"No, I'm saying he thinks like a serial killer."

I held my breath when I turned to CNN and saw that Detroit's new serial killer had made national news. Sixteen-year-old Olivia Harvey from South Lyon had been found in a park this morning, beaten and stabbed 41 times.

"At least she doesn't look quite as much like you." Angela's voice startled me so badly I jumped. "Did you see the last one? That girl looked like she could be your twin."

"Thank you, Angela. Because that makes me feel so much better." I muted the TV, but I couldn't take my eyes off the screen. "So they ruled them all serial killings?"

"They had to. The killer left Polaroids of the first two girls with the body."

Angela didn't notice the gasp that escaped me. She kept talking.

"Mom was watching the news this morning and they had some expert profiler on. He said the killer was claiming his victims."

"He said that would happen," I whispered. "Angela, he knew!"

"What are you talking about?" she asked, finally turning her attention back to me.

"Seth! He knew! Yesterday he told me another girl would die, and not just eventually. He said someone would die *last night*. Promised me, even!"

"Well, that's not such a big deal. I mean, the others both died on the previous two Saturday nights. That's why they've nicknamed the killer the Saturday Night Slasher."

"He also told me the killer would leave a message so that they'd have to connect the killings."

"Huh. Well that was kind of a lucky guess."

"It wasn't a guess."

"How could it not be a guess?"

My mind was reeling with a million different thoughts. That sick feeling I'd had in my stomach the day before was back. So much so that I had to put down my ice cream. "I don't know, but he knew. I swear to you Seth *knew*."

Angela stared at me like I was the one who was crazy and then she burst into laughter. "Do you realize what you're saying?"

What exactly was *I saying?*

"Ellie, you just accused Seth of killing three girls—of being a serial killer!"

Angela started laughing again, and I tried to laugh with her, but I couldn't. When she saw the look on my face she got herself under control. "You can't be serious," she said. "A serial killer? Do you really think that Seth, the hottie seventeen-year-old boy across the street who's bringing you roses, could actually *kill* someone?"

I had to think about it. *Did* I think that? Did I really believe Seth could do it? I found myself nodding my head.

Angela rolled her eyes. "Okay, I get that he freaked you out a little yesterday, but now you're the one who's being crazy. So he's a little forward—which, I'll be honest, I would *love* if he came on to me like that—but that doesn't make him a psycho."

Angela was calling me crazy, but the more I thought about it the easier it was to believe. "Think about it," I said. "The murders started right after Seth moved to Michigan. And you say he really likes me, right? All the dead girls look just like me! Plus, the killer's obsessed with stabbing his victims and there's no question Seth knows how to handle a knife."

"So *you* say."

"I know what I saw! And yesterday he was talking about knowing all the vulnerable spots on the human body in order to be able to stab them as many times as possible before they died. His aunt said he knows first aid and stuff. And you know how strong he is."

"Getting good grades in biology and knowing self-defense isn't a crime."

"He attacked me in the street the other day!"

"He *attacked* you?"

"Yes! Attacked me! Just to scare me. Just to show me that he could."

Angela was clearly not being convinced.

"He's smart. Like, *really* smart. He knows things about me that he shouldn't, he breaks into my room, he—"

"He broke into your room?"

"More than once. Look at what he did to my video game."

I turned on *Skateboard Pro 2000*, but it didn't have the desired affect. Angela read the high score list and squealed. "Oh my gosh, Ellie, that is so sweet! Didn't you just die when you saw this?"

"But how did he do it? And when? It's not like I invited him over. Plus, he never came home last night. I know, because I sat up all night waiting for him."

That made Angela pause. "Stalk much, Ellie?" she said with a smirk.

"I'm serious!"

"I can see that." Angela finally lost her patience with me. "You are such a freak. Remind me never to have girl-talk with you again."

"No one asked you to in the first place."

Angela started to leave and stopped at my door to glare at me. "Seth is sweet, funny, romantic, and completely gorgeous. And for some insane reason he likes you. *You* are an idiot! I am not going to let you screw this up because you're a freaking prude."

"Bite me," was my brilliant comeback.

"Whatever. I'm going to talk to Seth," Angela grumbled.

"I hope he leaves your mutilated body in a park!" I called after her.

I eventually came out of my room, but I just hung around the house. No way was I going to go outside and risk seeing Seth. For some reason it was a relief to have my dad come home that night. We spent the evening watching any channel on TV that didn't have the news on, and we talked about what other types of cars I might like. He didn't ask about Seth either, but unlike my mother, he didn't seem to care much about it, and that was nice.

When I went up to bed I found a note on my pillow along with one of the flowers pulled from the vase on my dresser. In strong handwriting it read:

What lies behind us, and what lies before us
are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.
~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

The note wasn't signed, but I knew it was from Seth. I tried to tell myself that he'd given it to Angela to give to me, but Angela would have handed it to me, watched me read it, and then made a huge fuss over it. No way would she have been able to just place it on my pillow for me to find later, even if Seth had given her those exact instructions.

I went to my window, sighed when I found it locked, and then turned my attention back to the note. I knew what the saying meant, but I wasn't sure exactly what Seth was trying to tell me with it. Was he telling me to look inside him? Because when I did that all I saw was a possible homicidal maniac.

Or did the "us" mean him and me? What lies behind us being yesterday, and what lies ahead of us being… I shudder to think. Either way there was definitely nothing lying within us or between us or around us or anywhere because there was no *us*.

I wanted to crumple up the note and throw it away, but I couldn't. There was something about it. Just like there was something about the vase of roses on my dresser that I couldn't dump bleach on no matter how many times I'd thought about doing so.

I took the rose off my pillow and put it back with the others after taking in a long drag of its scent. Then I taped the note to the mirror on my dresser and tried not to think about it as I went to sleep.

My dreams that night were the worst they'd been all summer.

After everything with Seth, and the serial killer stuff, and the dreams, I had an unhealthy amount of tension built up inside me. So I may have been acting a little crazy come seven a.m. I went barging into my sister's room and began rummaging through her drawers. I wasn't exactly being graceful and neither was Angela with the mouthful she gave me when I woke her up. "Sorry," I grumbled. "But there's a pick-up game in the park at 7:30. I want to get there before they pick teams."

"And that would require ransacking my dresser because…?"

"Because when I played frisbee football at the party the other night it was a million times easer to move around in your tank top and shorts than in baggy jeans and a jersey. Not to mention I got elbowed in the boobs *way* less."

"Sure," she agreed with a snort. "That's because the Neanderthals you always play with finally realized you had boobs to watch out for."

"Are you going to help me find something to wear or not?" I snapped, throwing a pile of clothes on the floor.

"All right. Geez. Do you mind?"

Angela acted like it was a huge ordeal to get out of bed, but I noticed her smile as she slid her closet door open. “You have a sports bra, yes?”

“Of course.”

“Then here.” Angela threw me a white tank top. “Wear that over it and take the pink Adidas pants. Second drawer, left-hand side. You’ll have to wear them low on your hips, cause your legs are longer than mine, but they have a drawstring. Get one drop of blood on them and you’re buying me new ones.”

“Whatever.”

Angela sighed and finally cracked a grin. “I work from ten to four today.” Angela works at Old Navy. “Come see me and I’ll help you pick some stuff out. I’ll even get you my employee discount.”

“Maybe, if I had a way to get there,” I grumbled, still peeved that she’d ditched me Saturday.

“I’m sure Seth would be more than happy to give you a ride.”

“A ride to hell on the Saturday Night Slasher Express,” I muttered as I left.

“It’s not even Saturday, freak!” she yelled after I’d slammed her door.

“She shoots, she scores!” Dave hollered, slapping me a high five. “And that’s game, losers!”

It felt really, really good to let go all of the tension, anger, and frustration inside me, and as a result, I killed on the court that morning. Sure when I’d shown up in Angela’s workout clothes the guys had given me crap about not being able to play now that I was a girl, but we’d been out there for three hours and I’d not been on the losing team once.

My theory was right about Angela’s clothes, too. I was much cooler, much more comfortable, and my chest had only been assaulted once this morning. When I got hit, they’d even stopped the game for a minute to make sure I was okay. I didn’t need that, but I definitely needed to take Angela up on her offer to help me shop.

I crashed onto a bench, ripped off my helmet, and wiped at the sweat on my face while I caught my breath. As I drained a bottle of water, this guy Greg, that I’d just scored the winning goal on, fell down beside me. “You may look like a chick now Westley, but you’ve still got game.”

“Of course I do,” I teased, “and if you weren’t so easy to score on I might actually get to use it sometimes. This was barely a workout.”

Greg’s grin grew as wide as his face. “Girl, if you were looking to score all you had to do was say so. You have no idea how easy I can be.”

I groaned for the hundredth time today—the innuendos had been nonstop. I punched Greg in the arm and hollered, not just to Greg, but to everyone present, “Am I really going to have to hear this crap every time we play from now on? You’re like a bunch of wild dogs!”

Among the laughter someone shouted, “A bullmastiff baby! Or a pit-bull!”

“You wish Sanchez!” someone else said.

Another guy chimed in, “More like a Chihuahua!”

I groaned again and a shadow fell over me. I looked up to see Dave smiling down at me. “Admit it Westley. You like playing with us better than the J’s.”

“Never!” I laughed. “You just like me playing with you guys better because it means you get to win occasionally.”

“You talk a lot of smack for someone wearing a ponytail,” Dave said, offering me a hand up. “You and me, one-on-one sometime. We’ll see who leaves crying.”

“You’re on.”

As I gathered my things I noticed a familiar tall, lean figure propped against a shiny BMW near the edge of the park. When he caught my attention he held up his index finger and motioned for me to come to him. *Yeah, right.*

I quickly glanced away, but I knew the minute I was alone Seth would come after me, so I did something I’ve never done before in my life.

“Hey Dave, you heading home?”

“Yeah. What’s up?”

I shot Dave a smile much more confident than I actually felt. “You mind taking the long way? Walk a girl home?”

“Uh…” Dave looked confused and very surprised, but at least he didn’t look disgusted. “Yeah,” he said a little uncertainly. “Sure.”

We headed across the park together in the direction of my house. And I did everything I could not to look behind me, where I knew Seth was probably still watching, completely furious.

“Thanks,” I said in order to break the awkward silence that had settled between Dave and me.

“No problem. What’s up?”

“It’s stupid really.” I laughed nervously. “You know that whole serial killer on the loose thing?”

“Yeah, I heard about that.” Dave glanced at me curiously. “It got you spooked?”

“Something like that. I sort of fit the profile of all the dead girls, you know? My Dad’s going a bit crazy over it. He made me promise I wouldn’t go anywhere alone. I’m also pretty sure I’m grounded every Saturday night until the guy’s caught.”

"I guess your dad's never seen your right hook."

I smiled at that. At least somebody thought I could handle myself. "Could be worse, I guess," I said, shrugging. "He could have locked me in my room and nailed the windows shut."

Dave chuckled and then completely changed the subject. "So… who was that guy you were with at the diner the other day?"

I snorted and shook my head. *Guys.*

"What?" Dave asked defensively.

"Nothing. That's just the exact same thing he asked me about you."

"Oh yeah?"

"Just as soon as we sat down. He thought you and I looked *chummy*." I gestured quotation marks with my fingers.

Dave seemed amused by this, but he didn't say so. Instead he repeated his question. "So who is he? I didn't realize you were seeing anybody."

"His name is Seth," I explained as my face turned devastatingly red. "He moved into the house across the street from mine. And, uh, yeah, *not* seeing him."

"You sure? Because it kind of looked like you two were… *chummy*."

"Oh for crap's sake!"

Dave burst into laughter. "Chill, Westley. I'm just messin' with you."

"You and everyone else for the last freaking week."

"Can you really blame people?"

"It's not like you guys haven't ever seen a girl before."

"Come on, you know you're different. It's got people talking."

"Different?" I asked, startled. "I'm not different."

Dave looked me up and down with one eyebrow raised.

"I'm still the same person," I said. "It just happens that this"—I gestured to my outfit—"is surprisingly comfortable and a lot easier to play in."

"Sure," Dave said, suppressing a laugh. "But it's more than just the clothes. I don't think I've ever seen you without at least one of the J's present. You're branching out."

"Pure necessity. The J's are at camp. You try spending a whole summer with nothing but an X-box and my sister to keep you company."

"Actually," Dave said, considering the possibility. "I wouldn't mind —"

"Ugh. Spare me the Angela swoonage, okay?"

"Fair enough. But still. Going to parties…"

"Long story."

"Dating…"

"I told you I am *not* dating—"

"Flirting with guys so that they'll escort you home…"

My jaw just about fell off my face it dropped so fast. “I didn’t—that was *not*…” My voice trailed off. I didn’t have a clue how to finish my sentence. I glanced around frantically and was relieved to see we were almost to my house.

Dave burst out laughing and I punched his arm hard enough that he nearly tripped on his skates.

“Would you cut that *out*?” I yelled. “The whole messing-with-Ellie thing is really outwearing its welcome.”

Dave continued to laugh until we reached my driveway. “Hey.” He stopped and pulled his hands up in defeat. “I never said different was a bad thing. Whatever your deal is right now, it suits you.”

Oh man, I was going to blush again, I could feel it. How embarrassing.

Dave punched me back then, more playfully than I’d hit him but still hard enough to nearly knock me over. “Just don’t go getting all soft with your game,” he said. “No one’s going to show you any mercy just ‘cause you went and got a little hot.”

This time I just rolled my eyes. “You can leave now.” I pointed to my house. “You are no longer of any use to me.”

“Later,” Dave said, but as he turned to leave, he noticed Seth working over the punching bag in his garage and stopped to watch him for a second.

I was surprised I hadn’t noticed the Beemer parked out front when we skated up the street. And I definitely didn’t like the fact that every time I ignored Seth he felt the need to beat something.

Dave eyed Seth for a minute longer, then turned back to me more serious than he’d been all morning. “Be careful with that guy,” he said. I couldn’t hide how surprised I was by Dave’s warning. “I saw him at X-treme Saturday night. Let’s just say he’s not shy with the ladies.”

“Oh, I have no doubt of that,” I said dryly.

So he got mad at me, went to a club, and made out with as many chicks as possible. Not really surprising.

“How’d you get into X-treme, anyway?” I asked. “You’re not eighteen.”

Dave winked. “I have my ways.”

“Fake ID?”

“You should invest in one and come with us sometime. You know, since you’re branching out and all. You’re tall. You could pass for eighteen.”

“Dancing? Are you kidding? I think I’ll stick with hockey.”

“Well, see you Wednesday morning, then.”

“Yeah.” Something occurred to me then. “Hey Dave? Out of curiosity, did any of those girls Seth hooked up with Saturday night

happen to be red heads?"

"Yeah, actually."

And Angela thinks I'm crazy. What if that red head was Olivia from South Lyon?

Dave pulled me from my thoughts when he said, "After seeing you at the diner, I assumed he was with you. I almost beat him down when I realized he wasn't." Dave glanced behind him again, where Seth was still viciously beating away calories. "Kind of glad I didn't."

"A wiser choice than you realize." I laughed. "Thanks for the thought, though, and thanks for bringing me home."

"No problem. See you later, Ellie."

For a second I watched in wonder as Dave skated away. I think that was the first time he'd ever called me by my first name. Maybe something *was* different about me. "You've been spending way too much time with Angela," I muttered to myself and then hurried into my house before Seth could stop me.

Wednesday morning I expected Seth to show up at the park like he had on Monday since I'd done everything in my power to avoid him. Sometimes it's nice to be wrong. I got to have a nice stalker-free game. Well, nice except for the part where Dave told everyone I had to have a babysitter on account of being serial killer bait.

Babysitter comment aside, though, I have to admit I was relieved when a few guys who live closer to me offered to take me home. I didn't want to ask Dave again and have him think I liked him. But I also knew Seth would probably be in his garage working out—AKA waiting for me—when I got home, and I didn't want to be alone when I showed up.

The escort turned out to be unnecessary. Seth's garage was open like it always is, but I was surprised to see that he wasn't in it. Then I noticed that his car wasn't there and my heart leapt for joy in my chest.

I'd been cooped up in the house so much lately, hiding from Seth, that even though I'd just played hockey for the last couple of hours I couldn't bring myself to go inside. I fell to the grass in my front yard, ripped off my skates, and lay there enjoying the fresh air.

I could have stayed like that for hours, except for some reason Seth's open garage seemed to be screaming at me. The car was gone, the house was completely dark and still, and the garage was left wide open. It was begging me to come over and take a look around. Not that I'm some major snoop or anything, but Seth had me seriously freaked. I figured I'd be safer if I could find out something—anything—about him. Plus, if I could find something really creepy to show Angela, she might get off my case about him.

It took me ten minutes to work up the guts to go over there, but once I did I was kind of fascinated. It made me realize how desperate I was to know more about Seth.

You'd think that someone who drives a BMW would want to park it in the garage, but Seth never did—probably because there was no room for it with all the gym equipment and the piles upon piles of boxes. It seemed to me like Seth and his aunt didn't plan on staying in the neighborhood long. They'd hardly bothered to unpack.

I read the labels on some of the boxes. At first they seemed normal —photos, books, crock pot, Christmas decorations. But then I started seeing boxes labeled FBI, first-degree murder, fingerprinting, child abduction, federal laws, local law enforcement procedures… "What the?"

That was weird. I mean I didn't know what I'd expected to find in here, but as creeped out as I suddenly was, I guess a part of me hadn't believed I'd find anything strange.

I knew I should leave, but there was a tall metal cabinet sitting in the corner and I simply couldn't help myself. I opened the cabinet and stared in disbelief. Knives—lots of them, and all different kinds. Seth had everything from a machete to a Swiss Army knife, and they were all neatly hanging there shiny and sharp, like they were on display in a museum.

Deciding it was definitely time to leave, I shut the cabinet, turned around, and screamed when I found Seth standing at the entrance to his garage.

Seth didn't say anything. He was standing there with his hands tucked casually in his pockets, watching me through narrowed eyes. He was also, I noticed, standing between me and any escape route from his garage.

"Seth!" I gasped as soon as my heart started beating again. I forced myself to play it cool. "Geez you scared me. I didn't hear you pull up."

"That's because I didn't pull up. I walked up." Seth's voice was toneless, his face still cautious.

"But where's your car?"

"Technically it's my aunt's car. She does drive it every now and then."

"Oh." *Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Ellie, you moron!*

I waited for him to say something, but he didn't. He didn't move. He didn't speak. He just stood there. It was torture.

"So…" I gulped. "Did you go for a walk or something? Exploring the neighborhood a little?"

"I was at your house. Angela found me waiting for you on the porch when she left. She told me I could wait inside." Seth finally removed his hands from his pockets—only to fold them across his chest. "I didn't realize you'd try to come see me first."

"Oh… yeah… well I…" *Think, Ellie! Think!* "I was just in my yard and I thought I heard a cat meowing." *Yeah, that's good.* "It didn't look like you were home, and I was afraid it was stuck in here."

"It was nice of you to be so concerned."

"I didn't find it. I must have just been hearing things. Sorry. I guess I'll just be going now."

I stepped forward and to the side, planning to give Seth a very wide

berth, but the second I moved Seth took a matching step, placing himself directly in front of me again. “What’s the rush?” he asked casually.

“No rush,” I said nervously. “I’ve just been playing hockey for the last couple hours. I’m tired and I kind of need to hit the showers.”

I took another step and again Seth matched me, but this time he’d moved forward a little too. A few more steps and he’d be within arm’s reach. I froze and so did he.

Maybe if I reasoned with him… “Seth.”

“Ellie?”

We stared each other down—me looking at him wearily, him looking politely inquisitive.

When I couldn’t take the silence anymore I sighed. “You’re not going to let me leave, are you?”

Seth’s face lifted then, as if this thought had never once occurred to him. He stepped aside and waved his hand, gesturing for me to be his guest. I definitely wasn’t falling for it, but I didn’t think I was likely to get another chance, so I took off running.

Seth snatched me up so fast I didn’t even see how he did it. In a split second my feet were off the ground and he was dragging me inside his house. I kicked and punched as hard as I could, but he had me from behind and I couldn’t make any good contact.

As Seth struggled to get the door shut behind us I managed to kick him hard enough that he dropped me. I ran for the front of the house, but Seth caught me near the base of the stairs and flung me over his shoulder.

I like to think it was with great effort that he managed to get me into his room. I mean, I struggled—you bet I struggled. I’m even pretty sure he’d have a few bruises later. But Seth seemed to know exactly how to hold on to me, and he was just plain stronger.

Before I knew it, he’d dropped me on his bed and gone to stand in front of the door. I went straight to the window, but unlike my house, there is no roof to climb out onto, just a second story drop. I whirled around and gave him a mouthful that would make a sailor blush.

Seth leaned back against the door, enjoying himself immensely. “Ellie, calm down. I just want to talk to you.”

“Then try using a phone, freak!”

“You’d never take my call. Just like you won’t answer the door when I come over.”

“I wonder why!”

I was so angry that I grabbed the first thing I could reach—a lamp off of his nightstand—and chucked it without hesitation. Seth had to scramble to duck from it. He was surprised that I’d thrown it at him, but instead of getting angry like I’d expected, he looked at the busted

lamp and sighed. “Ellie, come on, stop it. I only want to talk.”

I picked up his alarm clock tore it from the wall and hurled it at his face. He didn’t duck quite fast enough this time and it clocked him—excuse the pun—really good on the side of his forehead.

Seth pressed his hand to his head like it hurt and calmly said, “Fine. We’ll do this the hard way.”

Reaching for the next thing I could grab, I screamed, “You mean we’ve been doing it the easy way?”

One corner of Seth’s mouth twitched into a smile and then in a flash he had me pinned face-first to the floor. “I do love your spunk,” he told me, pulling my arms behind my back, “however inconvenient it is at the moment.”

I wasn’t in the mood for his compliments. I started screaming as loud as I could and tried to wrench myself free, but my arms screamed in protest.

“If you hold still it won’t hurt,” Seth said calmly after I gasped. “And you may as well stop screaming. There’s no one home to hear you. Not here, or in either house next to us, or in your house across the street.”

“So I should just lay here and take it?” I yelled. I thrashed even harder and cried out, surprised by the pain that shot through my shoulders.

“Careful Ellie, you could dislocate your arm like that. You need to hold still.”

I didn’t have any choice but to stop struggling.

“There,” Seth said proudly. Though, if he was proud of me for calming down, or proud of himself for forcing me into submission I couldn’t tell. “Now, are you going to be reasonable?”

“Get off me!”

“If I do, you’ll just try to run away and I want to talk to you.”

“I don’t want to talk to you! You can’t treat people like this!”

“You’re not leaving me any options. I’m going crazy waiting for you Ellie.”

“Clearly!”

“I like you. A lot.”

“Well you’re doing a bang up job at winning my heart you psycho!”

“So I’ve noticed. Tell me how to do it right, and I’ll let you up.”

“*You* can’t. It’s impossible. So why don’t you go abduct someone who would appreciate it? Angela’s as stupid as you are crazy. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind.”

“I don’t want Angela. I want you.”

Even despite how angry I was that statement made me blush. It’s just that no one—and I mean *no one*—had ever picked me over Angela before.

"But *why*?" I asked before I could stop myself. "Angela's prettier and popular. Plus, she probably doesn't wonder if you're the spawn of Satan."

Seth ignored the Satan crack. "Aside from my weakness for redheads?" He chuckled and then sighed. "Ellie, I'd really rather have this conversation face to face. If I let you up will you talk to me, or are you going to start throwing things again?"

At this point I was pretty sure Seth wasn't going to carve me up—at least not today—so I decided to give in and let him say whatever it was he wanted to say. I figured the sooner I did, the sooner I'd get out of here.

"Fine. You want to talk, then talk. I'll behave as long as you stay away from me. And none of your soft caress/smoldering gaze/sexy voice crap either!"

Seth laughed as he lifted himself off me, but he didn't seem to trust that I wasn't going to bolt. He took a seat propped against his bedroom door.

After swinging the stiffness out of my arms, I climbed up on his bed, which was pushed into the far corner of his room, and placed myself securely against the two walls.

Seth sat there with this look on his face as though he were trying to figure out exactly how to proceed.

Well I sure wasn't going to help him out with conversation so I took the opportunity to check out his room. He had plaid sheets, a couple posters up on the walls of bands—it bothered me that he had the same taste in music that I do—a bookshelf full of CD's, DVD's, video games, and paperback novels.

At first glance it looked perfectly normal, just like his garage had, but like the garage there were a few subtle differences. For one, it was clean. I don't mean it was more picked up than my room—which I'll admit is a little sloppy, though definitely not the "pig sty" my mom says it is—I mean his room was *clean*. There was not a single dirty sock, his bed was neatly made, and the things on his bookshelf were alphabetized. Seriously, alphabetized.

Which brings me to my next problem. Seth's DVD collection consisted of movies like *Silence Of The Lambs, American Psycho, Seven,* and the entire collection of the TV show *Bones*. I didn't recognize any of the books, but judging from the titles they were all crime novels. And, of course, there was his lovely video game collection starting with good ol' *Assassin's Creed*.

I heaved a shudder and moved on with my inspection, stopping short when I saw the CB radio on his dresser. *Random*.

"It's a police scanner," Seth said, startling me so bad I knocked my head against the corner behind me.

I'd almost forgotten Seth was in the room, he'd been so quiet. When I looked up his eyes were fixed on me. He'd clearly been watching me analyze his room. I wondered if he could tell what I was thinking about it. I hoped not. "A police scanner?" I repeated just to break the tension in the room. "Are those even legal?"

"Depends on what you use them for."

"And what do you use it for?" *Evading the police after you carve up girls with one of the bazillion knives in your garage?*

Seth's eyes narrowed as he considered answering me, but when he spoke he said, "You don't like me."

It wasn't a question, but he waited for an answer. When I didn't give him one he asked, "Do you *hate* me?"

He seemed sincerely curious, so I felt bad for not responding this time. The problem was, I wasn't sure how to answer. Hate didn't seem like the right word.

The seconds of silence ticked on.

When Seth finally spoke again he said "I don't understand you," and he didn't look like he was happy to be admitting that. "You aren't like other girls. You don't…"

Seth was really struggling for words now but he didn't seem upset exactly, just frustrated. "No one's ever responded to me the way you do."

I tried not to scoff at that too badly, since I knew somewhere deep inside Seth there were, in fact, feelings. Still, I made enough of a reaction that Seth's eyes flashed a hint of self-consciousness. "Did you know I'm from Beverly Hills?" he asked me suddenly.

I thought about not answering again, but that felt mean and something about the way Seth looked just then made me unable to be a jerk. Grudgingly I said, "Not surprising."

Seth was trying to hide his emotions, but I could tell he was relieved when I spoke. "Things are different there. *People* are different." He hesitated again and then said, "I'm rich, I'm good-looking, and my aunt is a very famous novelist, so I know a lot of the right people."

I was startled by how matter-of-factly Seth blurted all that. He wasn't bragging, though, he was just explaining something. Whatever it was, I wasn't catching on. I think Seth could tell, too, because he smiled a little and explained himself further. "In the world I was raised in, that's all that matters. People don't care about your personality. Most of them don't even bother to get to know you. It's all about what they think you can give them."

"Charming."

Seth shrugged off my sarcasm. "That's just life. At first I didn't think it would be any different here. All the girls I've ever known were all the same. Even Angela—at least a little. When I first met her all she

saw was the BMW and the smile."

"Actually, what she saw were the extremely hot workouts in your garage every morning."

With a gasp, I slapped my hand over my mouth. That was not supposed to come out of it.

Seth laughed once, but spared me the humiliation of teasing me. "But not you," he said, tactfully moving the conversation along. "The first time we met you saw…"

"A taser-wielding dog killer who mysteriously knew my name?" I offered, surprising us both when I cracked a smile.

Seth broke into a wide grin. "You're not like other girls, Ellie," he repeated. "Not like anyone I've ever met."

I folded my arms tightly across my chest and clamped my jaw shut. I refused to let Seth sweet-talk me into forgetting I was being held here under duress.

Seth ran a hand through his hair, frustrated that I'd clammed up again. "I don't know how to act with you," he confessed. "Most girls are easy, but I can't figure out what you want."

"That's because I don't want anything from you."

I'd warned him not to, but he looked up at me from beneath his long eyelashes and turned his voice to a smooth whisper. "I wish you did."

"Sorry." I forced myself not to tug at my clothes. It was rapidly becoming way too hot in his room. "I don't know what to tell you. Except that invading my personal space, breaking into my room and, uh, attacking and holding me hostage? All excellent ways to make sure that never happens."

But suddenly I wasn't nearly as angry about all those things.

"At least you didn't break my nose."

Ironically, realizing I wasn't angry anymore made me very, very angry. "Only because you had my arms pinned behind my back," I growled.

"I *am* sorry about that, Ellie. I would never have done it if you weren't throwing things at me head."

I shrugged at his dry tone. What did he expect, sympathy for the new bump on his forehead? "Sorry. It's my natural reaction to being *kidnapped*."

Seth sighed heavily. "I didn't want to do this." He dropped his gaze to his lap and began picking at the strands of hideous brown shag carpet that blanketed his bedroom. "It's degrading having to force you to talk to me like this."

"So why do it?"

Seth lifted his shoulders and dropped them, his mask of confidence finally dissolved. He looked beaten. "Because it's worth it if I can get

you to listen long enough to not hate me anymore."

Surprisingly, I'd almost prefer creepy-full-of-himself Seth. At least I knew how to feel about *him*. This new vulnerable Seth was much more confusing. Maybe Angela was right. Maybe I was insane thinking Seth was capable of killing people. But then, he did just kidnap me. Maybe he was manipulating me again.

I sighed. "It's not that I *hate* you."

Seth looked up at me again from beneath those thick long lashes, almost daring to hope. Geez, he knew how to tug at a girl's heartstrings. Seriously, why did he have to be so hot?

"I don't trust you," I said quickly. "You're not normal. I wasn't kidding about that. You seriously creep me out."

"So you don't like me," Seth clarified, "but you don't hate me."

I cringed at the harshness of the truth, but Seth bounced back to his normal self. "I can live with that," he said.

"Good. So then I can leave now?"

I started to get up and Seth rose to his feet. "Not quite."

"Why not? You plan on keeping me locked up in here forever?"

Seth cracked a smile. "Just until you develop Stockholm syndrome."

"But you just said you could live with me not liking you."

"Okay, I meant I could *work* with it, because here's the thing, I think you're lying to me."

"Excuse me?" I was so surprised by his statement that I didn't realize he'd made his way across the room to me until it was too late. I stepped back and fell onto the bed again. Glaring at him, I scrambled back to the corner and pulled my knees tightly up to my chest.

When Seth climbed on to the bed after me, I realized that the corner was not the best idea—Seth had me completely trapped. "You *think* that you don't like me," he said, "because you're nervous. But when I touch you, you don't exactly run screaming."

To prove his point Seth slowly grabbed my hand. I didn't like him being so close to me, and I trembled when he took my fingers in his. He was right, though. I didn't pull away. I totally could have because he was barely clinging to me as he brushed his thumb over the back of my hand. But I didn't.

"You see?" He brought my hand to his lips and kissed my fingertips.

I pinched my eyes shut and sucked in a sharp breath. My heart pounded in my chest as I felt Seth place my hand against the side of his face.

"You do like me," Seth whispered, breaking the no-using-his-sexy-voice rule again. He turned his head and kissed the inside of my wrist. "You're just scared."

Seth gently tugged my hand, his lips trailing up my arm as he pulled me closer to him.

“Ellie, look at me.”

I couldn’t open my eyes. I felt strangely dizzy. My entire body was shivering even though I felt impossibly hot. “Stop,” I breathed.

Seth obediently pulled his lips away from my skin but he still clung to my hand. “You’re going to give in sooner or later,” he said, his voice sending even more chills through me. “The sooner you stop fighting it, the sooner you’ll see you have nothing to be scared of.”

When he stopped talking I opened my eyes. I shouldn’t have. The eyes I found staring back at me were both sincere and hungry.

Seth’s gaze dropped to my mouth, making me suck in a breath. Then he slipped his hand around the back of my neck and began gently guiding my face toward his. My body obeyed without my permission. The second his lips brushed mine, naked panic set in. “I said *stop*!” I gasped, shoving him away.

Seth fell back slightly dazed, and seeing an opening I reacted instinctively. I leaned back and kicked my feet as hard as I could into Seth’s stomach, knocking the wind from him. “That was for kidnapping me, jerk.” I said and then flew across the street to the safety of my own home.

Sixteen. It didn't feel any different than fifteen. And July fourth? Still the lamest birthday ever. It started out pretty much the same as it has every year since I was old enough not to be in day care during summer break.

Mom and Dad busted into my room at seven a.m. with a very off-key performance of "Happy Birthday." Mom sat down on the edge of my bed and wrapped her arms around me. "I'm getting off work a little early so I can take you to the DMV before it closes. You'll be a licensed driver by the end of the day!"

I might be excited about that if I actually had a car to drive, I thought. But I didn't say that. I forced a smile and said, "Thanks Mom."

"And you and I will go first thing tomorrow morning and find that car that has your name on it," Dad said, pushing Mom aside for a hug of his own. "But in the mean time, I'll be home at six and we'll all go out with your sister for a birthday dinner together and then go see fireworks. How does that sound?"

Lame. But I didn't say that either. "Sounds good to me."

"Have a good day then, sweetie," Mom said, kissing my forehead and rising to her feet. "Try not to break any bones today."

"Yours or anyone else's," Dad teased. That made me crack a real smile.

"No worries, Dad. No one to fight with today. The guys at the park play Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays."

"Happy Birthday, kiddo."

After my parents left I tried to go back to bed, but I couldn't sleep. I was too depressed. I really hate self-pity, so I went for a long skate to get my blood pumping. A good adrenaline rush usually makes me feel better. Except it was already really, really hot out, so I didn't last that long. I can tolerate the sweat if I'm in a game, but just trolling around a deserted neighborhood isn't worth it.

When I came back inside I was surprised to see Angela at the table, already showered and dressed. "What are you doing up?"

"Brooke's coming to pick me up soon."

"You working?" I asked. Maybe this day didn't have to be a complete waste. I really did want to get a few new clothes. Especially

since the jersey I was currently wearing was sticking to my back. "Maybe she could take me, too, and you could…"—ugh, it was painful to say this to her—"you know, what you said. Help me pick out some new clothes."

Angela's eyes got so big they nearly popped out of her head into her cereal bowl.

"Forget it," I said quickly when I felt the blood rising to my cheeks. "Never mind."

"No, no, Ellie, we can! I'll totally help you! I just can't right now. I'm not working. I promised Brooke I'd go with her to Lansing. She has some family barbeque thing. We'll be gone all day."

"Oh."

When I turned to head upstairs Angela quickly stopped me. "But I'll be back around five-ish. We could go then."

The excited look on my sister's face was weirding me out. She was never excited by the thought of having to spend time with me. "Can't," I said. "Mom's taking me to the DMV and then we all have to go out for a family dinner and fireworks."

"Oh, yeah." Angela's enthusiasm was gone again. "That's today, isn't it?"

Nice.

"No offense," she said, "but that's like the lamest sixteenth birthday ever."

Did she have to rub it in like that? I was already bummed enough. It was actually getting hard not to show it. I just shrugged and headed toward the stairs again.

"Ellie?" I looked back at my sister. "Let's go tomorrow," she suggested. "We could take the day and go to the outlets. I'm sure mom and dad will give us the car. I'll even let you drive."

Angela smiled at me—a sincere, honest smile. Maybe the first real one she'd ever given me. But it was full of pity and actually made me feel worse. "Yeah, okay, maybe," I said, knowing I wouldn't go but not wanting to hurt her feelings for once.

By the time I got out of the shower I had the house to myself. Nothing like the sound of silence to make a bad day drag on. Daytime TV is the worst, and I quickly realized that everyone was right about my video games. Not that I want to take up assassinating people or anything, but *Skateboard Pro 2000* really was starting to get old.

With a sigh I turned off the X-box and retreated to my window to watch Seth work out. I'd told myself that I wasn't going to do that anymore, but I'd been unable to keep that promise. Yeah, the guy dragged me kicking and screaming into his bedroom, but it was weird. He really didn't want to hurt me. I think he was just trying to explain why he's a freak. It seemed like he knew he was a freak and was

almost insecure about it. I couldn't get that vulnerable, desperate face out of my mind.

Plus, he wasn't exactly forcing me to hold still when he'd pressed my hand to his face. My arm was still tingling everywhere his lips had touched it. And when his lips touched mine for that tiniest brief second? It wasn't even long enough to be counted as an actual kiss, but still, I couldn't forget it.

It didn't help that Seth had completely ignored me since then, either. He hadn't so much as looked at my house since I'd run from his. I mean, I know that's what I'd wanted, but now that I was getting that wish I was kind of annoyed by it. Was he mad at me for kicking him? Because that is so not fair, he'd *kidnapped* me!

The more I thought about Seth, the more I needed some fresh air. I went out to shoot hoops in my driveway. I'm not the best at basketball, but hockey doesn't help release anger quite as well as basketball if there's not someone to knock over.

I realized that I was making myself accessible for another attack, but I didn't care. I refused to hide today. After Seth finished his workout however, he disappeared into his house and never came back out. Not even a single glance my direction before he went inside. The jerk.

It's not that I necessarily wanted Seth's attention, it's just that since my friends were gone, my parents were at work, and my sister had turned down the opportunity to give me a makeover, the fact that not even my psycho stalker, who knew it was my birthday, wanted to see me today was kind of a low blow.

If it weren't for the UPS guy showing up right then, I might have gone over and asked Seth what his freaking deal was, even if it could get me sliced up and dumped in the Detroit River.

"I've got a package for an Eleanor Roosevelt Westley?"

"That's me," I said. And then it registered what he'd called me. "Eleanor *Roosevelt*?" I grumbled, knowing who the package was from without needing to look. "Idiots."

"Roosevelt? Is that really your name?" The UPS guy asked as I signed for the box.

"No. It's not. My friends just like to make fun of me because I was born on the fourth of July."

"Oh. Well, Happy Birthday!"

"Thanks." Was it sad that the UPS guy said happy birthday when even my own sister hadn't?

I waited until the truck was gone to see what my moron friends had come up with from camp. I was almost afraid to look. If it was a bunch of sweaty jock straps they were going to be dead.

I was so completely shocked by the red and white fabric in my

hands that the box fell to my feet forgotten. It wasn't the token souvenir Red Wings jersey that surprised me, it was the personalized autograph from Ten-time NHL All-Star Hall Of Famer Steve Yzerman on it that literally made my knees buckle.

"For Ellie, Happy sweet sixteen! Love, Steve Yzerman."

I read the inscription over and over again in disbelief as I sunk to the driveway. I was still in so much shock that I landed on the box and smashed it. When I pulled it out from underneath me I noticed a note in the bottom.

Ellie,

You'll never guess who was a guest coach today! We told him how you couldn't come because you were minus a nutsack, and that you were going to kill us just for getting to meet him since he's your hero, and the guy just handed this over. He's seriously the coolest! You'd better pick out a sweet ride for us now, since you totally owe us!

Happy Birthday!

Jessie, Josh & Jack

Ps. I was the one who told him about you. I think that deserves all-time shotgun privileges! -Jack

I couldn't believe it. Who cares if they called me Eleanor Roosevelt? Best. Friends. Ever. I wasn't angry about anything anymore. In fact, I felt like I was about to cry. I didn't, of course, but the rest of my day flew by after that.

I no longer cared that I didn't get my car, and that I had to go to dinner and fireworks with my family. I didn't even mind that Angela gave me a freaking dress as a birthday present, or the fact that as soon as we got to the city park to see the fireworks she ditched us and left me alone with my parents. In the end, my sixteenth birthday, well it still kind of sucked, but it wasn't the worst I'd ever had.

Things got a little better the next day too, because my dad got up bright and early with me and took me car shopping. It took hours, but he helped me get a sweet deal and when all was said and done I was the proud new owner of a Jeep Wrangler. Four-wheel drive, baby! Jet-black, removable doors and top... The J's were going to be squished, but I didn't care. I was in love.

Even Angela swooned a bit when I pulled into the driveway that evening. "Ooh, shiny!" she crooned. "Let's get cute and go cruising tonight, Ellie! We could pick up Brooke and Rachel, too. It would be so fun!"

"No way!" Dad said quickly. "It's Saturday. You girls are not going out tonight."

"But Dad!"

I'm not sure why the order threw Angela into a panic. I, for one, had been expecting it—Saturday night being serial killer happy hour

and all. And besides that, go cruising with her and her friends? In what universe did she think that was going to happen?

Angela launched into a huge hissy over it, though. She looked to me for help, but I just shrugged. “Dude. It’s the UFC prelims tonight.”

“The what?” Angela asked.

I explained as if she were slow. “Ultimate Fighting Challenge preliminaries?”

“Ugh!” Angela scoffed in utter disgust. “You are so hopeless.”

Dad and I had a good laugh when Angela stomped into the house.

Angela locked herself in her room with the cordless phone for a good half an hour, but eventually she joined us in the family room, sighing every so often as she painted her fingernails. “I thought you guys were going to watch some fight,” she said, frowning at the rerun of *SportsCenter* on the TV.

“Doesn’t start for an hour,” I said.

“And you’re just going to sit here and watch sports talk until it starts?”

“Yup,” my dad and I said in unison.

Angela sighed again and moved on to her toes. When she ran out of her own nails she said, “Ellie, give me your feet.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Okay your fingernails then.”

“What fingernails?” I asked. Mine were bitten down to the nail beds.

“Fine. Let me do your hair then.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m locked up like a prisoner on a Saturday night, I’m desperately bored, and I just want to see what it would look like.”

My sister had been trying to give me a makeover for practically my whole life. I never thought I’d see the day when I gave in, but something about the morning before-when she’d wanted me to go shopping with her-had stuck with me. I don’t know. It’s almost like, well, like she liked me. Like she wanted to be my friend and not just my evil sister. It had been *nice* of her to want to make my birthday a little better.

Knowing how hard it must be for her to be grounded on Saturday night for basically no reason, I felt like I owed it to her to return the favor. Instead of “get lost, loser” I glared at Angela and said, “Whatever.” After all, she’d been right about the clothes. And it’s not like anyone was going to see whatever she did to me tonight. It couldn’t hurt to let her do it just this once, right?

Actually, it hurt quite a bit. As soon as I’d agreed, Angela squealed and dragged me off to her bedroom. There was all kinds of scrubbing and pulling and poking and prodding involved, and then she pulled out these tweezers and went after my eyebrows. I never knew that

whole “beauty is pain” thing was literal.

Forty-five minutes after she’d started, Angela declared that the only thing left was to put on the dress she’d gotten me for my birthday. It was a strappy, knee-length sundress thing. “Casual but classy” she’d called it.

I’d never worn a dress before in my life. I told her I wasn’t about to start now, but she insisted, saying that if it didn’t fit me then she would give me the receipt and I could take it back and exchange it for something else.

After I broke down and put the freaking thing on, Angela marched me into her bedroom to look in her full-length mirror. She hadn’t allowed me to see myself before now and I was definitely afraid to look.

It wasn’t as bad as I’d expected. She’d gone really subtle with the hair and make up. I still looked like myself, just a cleaned up version of me. At least that’s what I thought anyway, but when Angela dragged me downstairs to show my parents you’d think she’d transformed me into Julia Roberts or something.

My mom gushed so lavishly I thought she might burst into tears. My dad however, after being quite startled, frowned. “Angela,” he said, with a weary sigh. “Is this really necessary?”

“Dad!” Angela gasped.

And even my mom turned on him this time. “Really, Steve, be nice. She looks beautiful. Ellie, you look fantastic.”

Mom and Angela waited for my dad to agree but he just reached up and rubbed his temples like he suddenly had a massive headache.

Almost as if it were fate letting my dad off the hook, the doorbell chose that precise moment to ring. My mom answered it, and when she called for me my heart gave out. Who could possibly be coming to see me now? For the first time since they’d left, I was really glad the J’s were out of town. If not even my own father could handle seeing me like this, then no way they could. They’d probably disown me.

My mother called for me again, and my dad and Angela went to see who it was, but I didn’t move. The only person that could possibly be standing at my door right now was Seth. Mr. Saturday Night Slasher himself. I was not about to let him see me all cleaned up and pretty like some sort of sacrificial virgin being brought to the alter for slaughter.

“Hey Mr. Westley,” I heard someone say.

I knew the voice instantly and was so surprised to hear it in my house that I forgot all about the dress I was wearing. “Dave?” I asked, coming around the corner into the living room.

My dad had been smiling at Dave as he shook his hand. My dad knows Dave fairly well, since he’s played golf with his dad for years.

But when Dave saw me he stopped shaking Dad's hand and his eyebrows went up. Way up. It made my dad's frown come back.

Behind Dave were Greg and Sanchez. "*Westley?*" Greg asked, nearly dropping the gum from his mouth, his jaw was hanging so slack.

"Oh, for the love of!" Dad groaned. "Do you see? Do you see what my problem here is Karen? How can you encourage this?"

Suddenly Dad's stress made perfect sense to all of us. Mom sighed.

"What are you guys doing here?" I asked Dave quickly before my mom could say something to Dad about puberty.

"A bunch of us are getting together to watch the UFC prelims," he replied. He was having trouble staying focused. "You down, or what?" Finally he couldn't take it anymore and he laughed. "Westley, what *is* that?"

Dave was pointing at my outfit. "Nothing." I sighed. "I was just taking it off."

My sister grabbed me before I could stomp up the stairs. "Oh, no you're not. I just spent forty-five minutes making you look fabulous. You can go just like you are."

"I'm not showing up to fight night in a *dress*."

"Nah, it's cool Westley," Dave said, holding back laughter. "You look…" He had trouble finding a word. Behind him Greg and Sanchez were still staring at me like I'd grown a third arm. When Dave finally said the word "nice" they snickered.

"So come on," Dave said. "Let's go. First round starts in ten."

"Got room for one more?" Angela asked Dave.

"For Angela Westley?" Dave grinned. "Always."

I gagged at Dave trying to flirt with my sister and then turned to her. "*You* want to go to *fight night*?"

"I want to do anything that will get me out of the house right now. Plus, I want to see everyone's reactions to my hard work."

I looked at my dad. He was still looking very grumpy. "I'm sorry, David," he said. "My girls aren't allowed to go out on Saturday nights right now."

"Oh, yeah, Mr. Westley, I get that whole serial killer thing. That's why I brought the guys with me." Greg and Sanchez puffed up their chests when Dave pointed at them—trying to look tough. "There're three of us. We'll go straight there, Angela and Ellie will never be alone, and there will be parents home. Then we'll bring them straight back here after it's over. I promise I'll never let them out of my sight."

Not that I didn't appreciate the jailbreak, but I was surprised that the guys were willing to make the effort.

Dad shook his head stubbornly. "I don't think so—"

"Mom!"

Angela threw my mom a desperate look and to my surprise Mom

gave her a knowing smile in return. “Steven? May I have a word with you in the office please?”

Oh great. Now Mom’s as bad as Angela with the matchmaking bit.

When my parents were out of the room Dave laughed. “Wow, you weren’t kidding when you said your dad was freaking out over this serial killer thing.”

“Yeah, and you morons really weren’t helping the situation any with all your gawking,” I said. “Drool much?”

For a split second Dave looked startled, but he quickly smirked. “Don’t flatter yourself, Westley. It takes more than a dress to get me excited.”

My parents came back in the room then. Mom looked smug. Dad looked beaten. “There will be adult supervision?” he asked and Dave nodded. “And you’ll go straight there?” Dave nodded again.

Dad held out for a few more seconds even though it was clear he’d already lost the fight. Finally he sighed. “I want you home by midnight,” he told Angela and me. Then he looked at just me and said, “And take your sister’s cell phone with you. I want you to call me every hour.”

As my dad went on with his instructions, I wondered how much of this was because of the serial killer and how much was the dress.

“And you have the pepper spray I got you, right?”

“Steve,” Mom said, finally putting a stop to Dad’s rambling. “They’ll be fine.”

Dave threw his arm over my shoulder. “We’ll take good care of her, Mr. Westley.”

Dad’s frown grew even bigger and he looked at Angela. “This is your doing,” he accused. It was definitely the dress making him upset. “She’s your responsibility.”

Angela understood his meaning as much as I did. “Don’t worry, Dad,” she said, beaming proudly at him. “I know what I’m doing.”

Dad eyed Dave’s arm around me again and grumbled, “It’s not you I’m worried about.”

After my dad stomped out of the room, Dave asked, “What was all that?”

I looked up at him like he was an idiot and shrugged his arm off me.

Angela rolled her eyes and said, “She’s daddy’s little girl. He’s having a hard time adjusting to the new and improved Ellie.”

“He’s not the only one having a *hard* time with it,” Sanchez muttered.

I elbowed him in the stomach as hard as I could on my way out the front door, forcing him to double over. “How’s that for hard? Pervert.”

On the way to the fight, Angela talked Dave into stopping at Rachel’s house. I tried to tell her that Rachel, who was even more

popular than Angela, would never agree to go to fight night with a bunch of juniors, but she insisted. Of course Dave wasn't going to argue if it meant he got to show up with both Angela and Rachel.

When we got to Rachel's house Angela dragged me out of the car. "What do you need me to come for?"

"Because even if she doesn't come I still want her to see you. She didn't think I could make you pretty."

Angela knocked on the door, waited about two seconds and then let herself in. "Rachel!" she called to a dark house. "We're here!"

"What do you mean 'we're here'?"

That's when the lights flew on and about a zillion people jumped out yelling "Surprise!"

Surprised does not begin to cover it. It was so unexpected that I didn't even know what was going on until my sister turned to me with an expectant face saying, "I know you didn't want a party, but you looked so miserable yesterday, how could I not?"

"You threw me a surprise party?" I asked, still not quite believing it.

"I had to. It's your sweet sixteen. I couldn't let it be just dinner and fireworks with your parents. What kind of big sister would I be?"

As the shock faded I whirled around. Dave, Greg, and Sanchez had come in the door behind me and were watching me with rather amused expressions. "You knew about this?" I asked.

"You didn't tell us it was your birthday," Dave said, grinning. Greg and Sanchez looked just as proud to have been in on the secret. "Angela found me at the fireworks last night."

I looked back at Angela, incredulous. "But I didn't just invite all my friends," she said, defensively. "See? I had Dave help me get your friends here too."

I finally looked around the room and sure enough all the guys from the park were there. Even Kowalski. And they all looked very excited to have surprised me for my birthday. It was a little overwhelming. I mean I knew we were friends and all, but a surprise party? And Dave, Greg, and Sanchez going through all that trouble to get me here? I didn't realize I was so well-liked.

"So?" Angela asked nervously. I think she was afraid I was mad at her. "What do you think?"

I continued to stare at the sea of people smiling at me and felt this strange lump in my throat. "I think this was pretty cool of you Ang," I admitted. And then, because it felt like we were coming dangerously close to some kind of sister bonding moment, I added, "Except for the part where you tricked me into wearing a freaking dress."

Everyone burst into laughter. "And that's why we love Ellie," Dave said, plopping his hand down on my head and ruffling my hair.

That must have been the signal for the party to begin, because everyone stopped paying attention to me and began mingling. I batted Dave's hand away from my head and he laughed again. "Happy Birthday, Westley," he said, and then disappeared into the crowd.

As soon as he was gone I mentally began counting. *Five… Four… Three…*

"Oh, my gosh, Ellie, Seth was right about you and Dave! You're perfect for each other."

I gave her too much credit. Next time I'd have to start at three.

"Uh, Seth didn't say we were perfect for each other, he said we were chummy. And, yes, he's right, we're *friends*."

"But you could so be more. I'm sure of it. I don't even think it would take very much."

"I thought we were all about Seth," I argued just for argument's sake.

"But Ellie you don't even like Seth, and you're right, he's kind of creepy."

That surprised me. "What makes you say that?"

"I went over there this morning to invite him to the party and found him buried in a pile of books about personality disorders. I asked him if he wanted to help me plan the party and he said he was too busy. When I asked what he was doing he said, 'Figuring out how to make Ellie fall for me.'"

"What?"

"I know, right? I would have thought that was super romantic if he weren't reading a book about sociopaths when he said it."

I don't know what I found more disturbing, that Seth was sitting around trying to figure out ways to make me fall for him, or that he was looking for advice from Hannibal Lecter.

"But *Dave*," Angela continued, snapping my attention back to her, "is perfect. True, he's not quite the Zac Effron Seth is, but he's still pretty cute and super popular. Plus you already like each other. You both just need a push in the romantic direction."

I sighed and Angela began pouting. "Please?"

"You can try all you want, but it's not going to work. Dave and I are just friends."

Angela took that as a green light to play matchmaker. She gave me a giddy squeal and ran off. As she disappeared I sighed again.

"Wow, she seems determined."

The statement came so naturally that I answered it automatically. "When Angela goes into matchmaker mode, there's simply no stopping her."

"So how do I get put on her list of viable candidates, and could you kindly point out who my competition is?"

That made me turn around. "Travis?" I asked, startled to see the jock strap from the lake party last week. His face brightened considerably when I called him by name.

"You remember," he said. "I'm glad."

He grinned this big cheesy grin at me that I couldn't find the least bit impressive. Once Seth pointed out what a player this guy was, it was easy to see.

I smiled at the thought of Seth nearly picking a fight with Travis last week. I'd been so mad at the time, but looking back, what he did was actually pretty sweet.

Seth? Sweet? Did I really just say that?

"I'm glad I found you," Travis said, placing himself in my line of vision so that I had to look at him. "We didn't really get the chance to talk last time."

"How did you find me, anyway? Angela didn't know who you were."

"So you were asking about me?"

Travis looked so pleased with this that it was kind of fun to burst his bubble. "No. Angela asked me about you after she saw us talking."

"And what'd you tell her?"

I shrugged. "I told her what I knew. That you're some guy named Travis."

Speaking of Angela. Where the freak was she? I figured for sure she'd have returned dragging a clueless Dave with her by now. I started scanning the crowd looking for her. Somewhere in the back of my brain it registered that Travis was asking me something, but I couldn't answer him because I'd spotted Seth across the room. He was talking to some girl I recognized from school, but he seemed to be paying about as much attention to her as I was to Travis.

I don't know why I'd assumed Seth wouldn't be there. Angela said she'd invited him. My heart gave an anxious flutter. Or maybe that was my stomach twisting in on itself at the sight of him. So hard to tell with Seth. Both reactions are equally likely.

"I see big brother's here again," Travis grumbled, startling me from my stare. He'd followed my gaze and was glaring at Seth so hard I had to smirk.

Seth felt us watching him and looked up. The lifelessness I saw in his eyes confused me. Oh, he stared at me, same as always, but there was no sparkle, no hint of desire, or even the danger that there usually was. At least, not until he looked at Travis. Then there was plenty of danger. He and Travis resembled a couple of caged pit bulls ready to tear each other's throats out.

Not that I'm naturally vindictive or anything, but an idea hit me that I simply couldn't resist. "Well you asked who your competition was," I said to Travis, then smiled as sweetly as I could Seth's direction.

I figured Seth wouldn't mind that I was using him since it was in an effort to get rid of Travis. He's a pretty sharp guy and it didn't take a

genius to see what I was doing. But when I sent him a big friendly wave and mouthed the words “Hi Seth,” he was shocked. He returned my smile and started making his way over to us.

Oh, great! I hadn’t meant to actually encourage him. Now the best I could hope for was that he and Travis would kill each other, thus ending the party and allowing me to go home and watch the UFC fight.

Before I had to deal with that problem though, Angela returned, dragging Dave with her. “Ellie, there you are! I’ve been looking all over for you.” She gave me a look that suggested she was not happy to see me standing there with another guy.

Dave eyed Travis curiously, too, but he wasn’t so subtle with his thoughts as Angela was. “Another guy you’re not dating, Westley?”

“Following my sister around like a lap dog, Holcomb?” I shot back.

“Oh, you guys,” Angela said with a laugh. Nobody could have missed the way she stepped up to me, putting herself between Travis and I, consequently pushing me next to Dave. “Who’s your friend, Ellie?”

After I begrudgingly gave introductions, Angela said, “So, Travis, how come I’ve never seen you around school?”

“I’m a senior over at Stevenson High in Livonia.”

“Oh. So who do you know from Canton?”

“Well, I’d like to know Ellie better,” he said. “She pretty much stole my heart when she busted that guy’s face at the lake last week.”

With that, Dave burst into laughter. “Yeah, she tends to do that.”

“What, steal hearts or punch people?” Travis asked.

I glanced at Dave, surprisingly curious of his answer, but he just smiled knowingly at Travis and said, “Good luck with this one,” plopping his arm over my shoulder. Angela had to be loving that.

“Speaking of punching people,” I grumbled.

Dave stepped away from me, lifting his hands in surrender. “All right. Chill, Westley. I’m just playin’.”

“Your favorite pass time lately. But I was talking about the fight. Can we still turn that on or what? I’m sure there’s a big screen around here somewhere.”

More like a small movie theater. Rachel’s parents owned one of the biggest houses in Canton. It made the lake house with the boat and the Jet Skis look rather unimpressive.

“What fight?” Travis asked.

Dave answered before I could. “The UFC Prelims.”

“Those are tonight?”

“Yup,” I said. “And we’re missing them, so why don’t the two of you go see if we can turn them on?”

Travis started to say something, but Dave gave me a mock salute

and said, “The birthday girl has spoken.”

I gave him a special salute of my own as he dragged Travis off to find Rachel. They weren’t even out of sight before Angela was clinging to my arm, bouncing up and down. “Did you see that? He was totally flirting with you!”

“That wasn’t flirting. That was Dave doing what he does best—giving me crap.”

“I don’t think so, Ellie. It’s obviously on a subconscious level, but Dave is in to you. But listen to me, if we’re going to make this happen, you really have to ditch muscle man. What’s he even doing here, anyway?”

“How should I know? It’s not like I invited him. I didn’t even know about this stupid party.”

Angela’s face fell and I instantly felt like a jerk. Which was surprising, because I don’t normally feel bad for being rude to Angela. But what was even more surprising was that I apologized. “I’m sorry,” I said, shocking us both. “I didn’t mean the party was stupid. I’m just annoyed by Travis. Oh, hey, I know. Why don’t you go find some girl to keep him busy?”

“Ooh. Good idea. Now, no more flirting with anybody else.”

“I wasn’t—” It was no use. Angela was already gone.

On the bright side, Angela was gone. And Dave was gone. And best of all, Travis was gone. I plopped myself down into an empty armchair with an exhausted sigh, and closed my eyes, enjoying the alone time. But I only got a moment’s peace.

“You left your hair down.”

Only one voice can make my heart speed up and raise the hairs on my neck at the same time. I opened my eyes and sure enough Seth was staring down at me with that familiar deep blue piercing stare.

“Angela made me,” I muttered, cursing myself for sounding as nervous as I suddenly felt.

Seth sat down on the arm of the chair, looking me over in a way that made me blush. “I like it,” he said. “*A lot.*”

He reached out to touch my hair and I cringed back so violently it startled him. In an instant his face went sour. “What is your problem?” he snapped.

“*My* problem?” Hey, if someone gets pissed at me, I get pissed back—just ask Kowalski. I can’t help it. I guess even possible psychopathic killers are no exception to my anger management issues.

“You were the one smiling all friendly a minute ago.”

“That doesn’t mean I want you to touch me. Geez, Seth! I was just doing that to piss Travis off so he’d leave me alone.”

Seth played back the scene in his mind and I could see the exact moment he realized it was true. His anger was gone, and, just like a

minute ago with Angela, I suddenly felt like a world-class jerkwad. Except I hadn't just hurt Seth's feelings a little bit, I'd crushed them.

He gave me this scorned, bitter look that racked me with so much guilt I couldn't let him leave. When he started to walk away I jumped up and grabbed his wrist. "Seth, wait. I'm sorry, okay?"

Seth glared at me, but calmed down despite himself the instant I touched him. I could feel the way his muscles relaxed beneath my fingers. When he looked down at my hand I let go of him, but I attempted a sincere smile. It probably looked more like a grimace.

Seth watched me for a moment as if he were in pain and then lost whatever internal debate he'd been having. "Here," he said sullenly. He pulled a tiny, messily wrapped gift from his pocket. "Happy Birthday."

"A present?" He'd gotten me a gift. I was shocked, and surprisingly flattered. "Seth, you shouldn't have got—"

"Just take it," he said, his anger returning so quickly it made my head spin. "I don't think I can handle any more blows to my ego from you."

I gasped. I was surprised he'd misunderstood me. Usually he reads me like an open book. "No, I didn't mean it like that. I'm just surprised. You didn't have to get me anything."

"Surprised? You are the most stubborn person I've ever met!" His face was starting to turn red, he was so frustrated. "Ellie, it shouldn't be a surprise that I'd want to do something nice for you on your birthday. I don't understand why you hate me so much."

For someone so mysterious Seth sure couldn't hide his emotions. That vulnerable, self-conscious kid I met in his bedroom was back, and he was clearly struggling with my constant rejections. Psycho or not, there was something about that face—and not just that it was beautiful—that made me want to make him feel better.

"Cut me some slack," I said in the softest voice I had. "I'm trying here." I held out my hand and Seth hesitantly dropped the package into it. As I tore off the paper I forced myself to be extra polite. Not exactly my strong suit—as my mother is always pointing out. "This was very nice of you Seth. Thank you."

I was surprised by what I found in my hand. Seth had given me a tiny pink Swiss Army knife on a keychain. "It won't fend off any serial killers," he said. "But they can come in quite handy, and everyone needs a good keychain for their first set of car keys."

I couldn't help the smile that crept across my face. The pink was the perfect contrast for my shiny black jeep, and, actually, the gift was surprisingly thoughtful.

"I saw the jeep parked out front of your house tonight. It's yours, right?"

My smile got even bigger.

"It's a beauty," Seth said. "But I don't think your friends are going to be very happy when they see the legroom in the back seat."

My eyes flashed up at Seth and after a moment I smirked. "Then they can walk."

Seth and I laughed, but the minute I realized we were acting like normal people together, I clammed up again. I couldn't help it. When I could no longer look at Seth, I turned my attention to the knife in my hand. I started pulling out all its gadgets—tweezers, a toothpick, scissors, nail file, and finally a tiny blade. I thought of all the different knives in Seth's garage. This one didn't look dangerous like those had. This one was cute.

"I know it's not an autographed jersey or anything," Seth said, sounding surprisingly self-conscious. "I was going to get you season tickets for the Red Wings, but my aunt suggested I start smaller."

I smiled, figuring Seth was kidding about the season tickets, but when I glanced up I couldn't really tell. I started to say "It's perfect," but then it dawned on me what he'd said. "How did you know about the jersey?"

Seth shrugged. "I was watching you from my room yesterday. I figured the jersey was autographed or something when you almost passed out."

"You were *spying* on me?" I asked, forgetting that Seth is surprisingly sensitive. Also ignoring the fact that *I* spy on *him* on practically a daily basis. In an attempt to soften the blow I said, "I'm surprised you didn't come say hi."

Seth kicked the carpet under his shoe. "I wanted to, but you made it pretty clear the last time we talked that you don't enjoy my company." His voice was suddenly bitter again.

"That's not fair, Seth. You *kidnapped* me. You dragged me by force into your house and locked me in your room. I was terrified! It was like you said—you could have done anything you wanted to me. Obviously I couldn't have stopped you."

Seth's face paled. "You don't think!" he gasped. I couldn't understand his reaction. It's like he'd never even considered the possibility that I'd been scared of him. "I wouldn't have hurt you, Ellie."

He looked so utterly horrified by that thought that I was shy to admit the truth. "It didn't feel that way."

Seth was starting to turn green, and the only thing he could manage to say was, "I'm sorry."

He meant it. He was definitely sorry. I didn't understand it, but it made me feel better. Less scared of him somehow. Perhaps I'd been a little harsh with that whole Saturday Night Slasher accusation.

Nobody as upset as Seth was by the thought of scaring me could be a killer.

Well, I couldn't just leave him looking and feeling the way he did, so I walked away from the crowd and took a seat on the steps that led upstairs. I motioned for Seth to join me. He was reluctant to do so, but when he did finally sit down he still couldn't manage to leave any space between us. I let it slide this time. "Seth," I said with a long sigh. "It's not that I hate you, because I don't—that's not it."

"Then what is it?"

"You don't just make me nervous, you scare the crap out of me. I wasn't kidding when I said there's something wrong with you. You're way too forward, you don't seem to have any concept of personal space, and you do things like break into my room and kidnap me. People—normal people—just don't do things like that."

Seth frowned so I quickly said, "But I don't hate you. I mean that. If you could just tone it down, we could probably be friends. Like right now? This isn't so bad."

Seth perked up at the tiny glimmer of hope I'd just given him. "I can do that," he promised me.

There was a determination in his voice that caught me off guard. When we made eye contact something happened. I don't think either of us realized just how close we were to one another but suddenly he was caught in a moment he couldn't resist, and I was caught in one I couldn't escape.

This is it, I thought as Seth's breath started to come faster. *My first kiss.*

There was no stopping it. I think he tried because he whispered my name rather helplessly as he started to lean in, almost like he was pleading with me to break the connection for him. But I couldn't.

In the end, it was Angela that snapped us out of it. "Ellie!" she yelled from across the room. Her voice shattered the moment between us. "Ellie, where are you? Your stupid fight is on. Has anyone seen the birthday girl?"

I just about jumped out of my skin and it took Seth a second to shake himself from his daze. I wasn't sure if I was more disappointed or relieved that Seth wasn't going to kiss me. I mean, did I really want my first kiss to be with someone who scared me? Someone who might very well be killing innocent girls in his spare time?

Someone who really liked me, and tried over and over again to prove it no matter how rude I was to him?

I had no idea.

"Did she say fight?" Seth asked, breaking me from my thoughts.

I was glad for the safe subject and nodded. "Yeah."

"The UFC Prelims?" Seth asked excitedly in this really adorable

way. “You like the fights?”

“I should have known you were a UFC fan,” I said. “What with the way you go at that punching bag in your garage.”

“I had the chance to train with Georges St. Pierre for a while last year. He got me pretty in to it.”

Seth shrugged as if it were no big deal, but let me tell you, training with Georges St. Pierre is *not* no big deal. “No freaking way! That’s awesome!” I jumped up and began dragging Seth across the house in search of the fight. *No wonder I love watching you work out so much.*

Seth came to an abrupt stop and raised an eyebrow my direction. It took me a second to figure out what his problem was but then my jaw dropped. “I didn’t!” *I did not just say that out loud!*

“You know, Ellie,” Seth said, not bothering to hide how much he was enjoying this moment. “You don’t have to watch from your bedroom. You’re welcome to join me anytime. I’d be happy to show you a few things.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say. I just stood there fighting the urge to be sick until Seth could no longer hold back his laughter. “Come on,” he said, tugging my hand. “I’ll give you the behind-the-scenes scoop.”

When we reached the rec room where Dave was already settled on the couch watching the fight, I was still feeling beyond mortified. Then to make matters worse both Angela and Dave immediately zeroed in on my hand. Or, more accurately, how it was still clinging to Seth’s.

“I found another UFC fan,” I explained, dropping Seth’s hand like a hot potato.

I couldn’t read Dave’s expression, but the look on Angela’s face was one of surprise and annoyance. After a quick glare at me she put on a big friendly smile. “Seth! I’m so glad you made it!”

Angela greeted him with a hug and somehow managed to place herself between the two of us when she let go. “So, you know about all this fight stuff?” she asked Seth. When he shrugged she weaved her arm through his. “Good! Because I am so lost. I need someone to explain it to me.”

Seth shot me a questioning look, but I just rolled my eyes sympathetically. I knew why Angela was acting all flirty with him, but I wasn’t about to explain her matchmaking plan to him. Especially not with Dave sitting right there.

Of course, it turned out that I didn’t have to explain anything to Seth, because when Angela pulled him down to the couch with her, she “accidentally” bumped me, knocking me straight into Dave. I would have killed her if I weren’t completely preoccupied with the fact that I was now in Dave’s lap. Um yeah, that wasn’t a little

awkward or anything.

"Did someone tap a keg I didn't know about?" Dave laughed as he scooted me off his lap to the empty spot on the couch next to him. "Because I'm pretty sure you usually have more coordination than that, Westley."

"I didn't fall, you dillweed!" I leaned around Dave to glare at Angela. "I was *pushed*."

"Geez, Ellie. It was an accident. Sorry. Freak out much?"

Okay, *so* not an accident. Angela's not exactly the queen of subtle and it was plenty obvious to Seth what she'd just done. I know, because he was glaring harder at the back of her head than he'd ever glared at me. And that's saying something, considering all the times I've called him a psycho to his face.

But at least Dave seemed completely oblivious. "Yeah, what's with you tonight, Westley? You're so grouchy. Sit back and relax already."

Feeling somewhat defeated—just not quite sure why—I sank back into the couch with a long sigh. The problem with that was that Dave's arm had been resting on the back of the couch and when I leaned back my head came to rest on it. Now, for someone who didn't know any better it could have looked like I'd just cuddled up with him, but freaking out and moving would have made me look like an idiot, so I stayed put and left it up to Dave to move his arm. Oddly enough, he didn't.

It didn't take long before the rec room filled up with enthusiastic fight watchers. Even Angela would squeal in either fear or disgust whenever there was an awesome hit. The only person unable to get absorbed in the fight was yours truly. That's right, me. The person who asked to turn it on in the first place.

And you know why I couldn't relax and enjoy myself? Dave, that's why. Dave and his stupid arm that he still hadn't bothered to move. I mean, leaving it there was basically like putting it around me. You know, sort of. Yeah, it was there first, but…

The stupid thing had to be asleep by now, so why hadn't he moved it? Did that mean Dave wanted his arm around me? Did I want Dave's arm around me? What did Seth think about it? And why on Earth did I care what Seth thought about it?

If Angela was right and Dave did like me, then I should be happy about that. Shouldn't I? I mean, he's the better—safer—option. Except that Seth isn't an option, he's a psycho. Isn't he?

And, again, how in the world did Seth even get into this debate? This was supposed to be about Dave and his stupid arm. Except that Seth and I had talked and it was almost normal, so now I was completely curious to talk to him again. You know, just to see if he could be semi-normal two times in a row. Not because I liked him or anything.

Okay, I'll admit I was obsessing about this, but at least it didn't go on for long. We'd only had the fight on for maybe ten minutes when Rachel wandered into the rec room and turned off the TV, claiming the fight was ruining the party. She ignored all the angry protests and turned on some lame dance remix of some even lamer pop song. Then she grabbed the nearest acceptable guy and began to dance with him. Several other girls followed suit and soon what used to resemble a fight night now looked more like a dance party. Seriously, all it needed was a smoke machine and a strobe light.

Angela got up to join the party and Seth rose with her. I think he was going to ask me to dance because he was looking right at me when he started to hold out his hand, but before he could say anything Angela slipped her arm through his and said, "Come on,

Seth. Why don't you show me how they dance in California?"

That familiar flash of anger swept across Seth's face so fast that Angela missed it. I didn't, though, so I nodded my head (encouragingly, I hoped) and mouthed, "just go with it."

Seth didn't look happy, but he let Angela drag him away.

"What was that all about?" Dave asked when they were gone.

"Nothing," I said. "Angela's just sticking her nose where it doesn't belong and this time it's going to blow up in her face if she's not careful."

"Angela's meddling?" Dave laughed. "In whose affairs, exactly?"

"Mine, of course, same as always. And Seth's. And now yours too."

"Mine?" Dave asked. "How is Angela meddling in my…"

Dave's voice trailed off as he realized that we were the only two people still sitting on the couch and that we weren't exactly sitting on opposite ends. I laughed when he looked back at me, slightly pale.

"You all caught up now, Einstein?" I teased. "I'm pretty sure she's told everyone her plan too. Notice how they're all conveniently ignoring us?"

Dave looked up, startled. We were sitting alone on the only sofa in a crowded room and amazingly no one was bothering us. Too amazingly. Some of them were watching us while trying to pretend not to. And then there was Sanchez, who wasn't pretending not to. He made suggestive gestures when he happened to catch our eye.

"See?" I told Dave, giving Sanchez a suggestion with a gesture of my own. "Everyone's trying to figure out what's up with us and, I'm sorry to say, you're even starting to make me wonder with all the flirting and the cuddling. Seriously, are you in to me or something?"

Dave's jaw fell slack about the same time as he realized his arm was still draped over the back of the couch behind me. When his eyes got huge and he slowly pulled his arm back to safety I burst out laughing. "Chill Holcomb, I'm just messing with you." I was laughing so hard tears were beginning to form in my eyes. "I mean, not the part about Angela trying to hook us up—she's totally doing that. But I'm not afraid you're trying to put the moves on me. Oh, man, you should see your face right now!"

I gave Dave's leg a pat as I jumped up and then laughed myself all the way into Rachel's back yard where I could get some air.

I was hoping for a little peace and quiet, but there were as many people outside as there were inside. Unlike at the lake last week, where there was all that wind coming off the water, it was still really hot outside tonight, so the pool appeared to be a pretty popular hangout. At least most of the kids swimming belonged to Angela's crowd—my friends were more the foosball and cheespuffs types—so aside from the occasional birthday wishes, they left me alone.

I took a seat on a patio swing and watched a bunch of jock straps try to impress bikini-clad girls by doing back flips off the diving board.

"There you are!"

I'd had maybe two minutes of freedom. "This is why I don't do parties." I groaned as Travis sat down on the swing next to me and handed me a red plastic cup. Diet Coke. Gross. "Didn't I ditch you once already?"

Travis laughed like I was joking—except, yeah, I wasn't—and then he began droning on about pointless crap. So it was a small miracle when my sister's cell phone went off.

"You didn't call me when you got there," my dad greeted me when I answered the phone.

"Sorry, Dad. I was a little distracted. You do know what Angela did to me, don't you? I assume that's what that little powwow with Mom was about before we left."

"Yeah. Sorry about that, kiddo. I wanted to give you a heads up, but Angela and your mother would have killed me."

I sighed. "If it makes you feel any better, I'd rather be home watching the fight with you."

"I know." My dad chuckled. "But don't worry. I'm TiVo-ing it for you."

"Sweet."

"Well, I should let you get back to your party now. I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine. No serial killers present. And, yes, before you ask, Rachel's parents are home. There's also no drugs, no alcohol, and plenty of prettier girls here than me to distract all the guys from the fact that I'm wearing a stupid dress."

"Very funny. Just remember—home by midnight."

I felt the urge to sigh again. "I wish you'd said ten," I complained, making my dad laugh again.

"You'll survive. I promise."

"Yeah, yeah. Bye Dad."

I laughed to myself as I hung up the phone, surprised that my dad had made me feel a little better. The feeling didn't last long though, because Travis was still there asking dumb questions like, "Hey, is that the new iPhone? Can I see it?"

"If it will shut you up," I said and handed him the cell. It didn't.

"That was pretty smooth with your dad," he said, his eyes glued to Angela's phone. He was as bad as she is. Seriously, I don't get the obsession with cell phones.

"What was smooth?"

"What you said about no guys paying attention to you when really there've been so many I didn't think I'd get the chance to talk to you

at all."

"I'm not that lucky," I grumbled.

Travis laughed again and handed me back Angela's phone. "Here, I programmed my number in there for you, so if I lose you again, you can call me."

"Yeah, okay, sure."

Again, Travis missed my sarcasm and went on to tell me how hot I looked in my pretty new dress.

I was so desperate to ignore him that I decided to brave the sugarless drink I was holding, but as I brought the cup to my lips I felt a hand brush my shoulder. The touch gave me the goose bumps, which could only mean one thing.

I glanced over my shoulder and Seth was there. He had his back to me talking to a couple of girls, but I was sure his touch had been intentional. It wasn't creepy, though. It was as if he didn't want to interrupt me, just wanted me to know he was there. The weird thing was how comforted I was by his presence.

I'm not sure how or when it happened, but I wasn't really afraid of Seth anymore. Now I was just curious. I needed to get rid of Travis so that I could talk to him again. "Man, it's getting late," I said with a fake yawn that turned real—this party was exhausting me. "I think I'm going to go find my sister."

I started to stand up, but Travis threw his arm over my shoulder. "Are you ready to leave? I could take you home if you want."

Yeah. Like that's gonna happen.

I sat back with a sigh. Travis was like a leech. Whenever I pulled away, he clung on tighter. "Come to think of it," I said, trying a different tactic. "I doubt I can go anywhere—birthday girl and all. There's probably a bunch of candles I'm supposed to blow out somewhere. I'd better go find out."

Travis's arm over my shoulder tightened just enough to make my temper flare. "I have a better idea," he said. So he was too stupid to pick up on my insults, but not too stupid to recognize that he was about to get ditched again. "If you need a break, I'm sure we could find a nice quiet place to relax until you're needed. I give a great back massage."

Um, ew.

I only have so much patience to begin with, and Travis had officially used it all up with that beauty of a comment. My hand clenched around my plastic cup. As soon as I got rid of this soda, he was seriously gonna get it.

I brought the cup to my lips to chug it, but before I could, it was knocked clean from my hand and landed all over Travis. Of course I knew who'd done it, but I didn't think it wise for Travis to figure out

the truth, so I pretended to be guilty. “Oh, Travis! I’m so sorry!” I gasped. My acting may have been a little over the top. “Are you mad?”

Travis looked way annoyed as he wiped at his clothes, but he still managed to smile. “Nah, it’s cool,” he said. He laughed as he got to his feet. “I’ll tell you what. I’m going to see if I can clean up a little, then I’ll bring you a new drink. Maybe a Redbull—something with a little kick in it.”

“Good idea.”

“I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

“I won’t,” I promised. And I didn’t either. I didn’t have to. As soon as he was gone, Seth took his seat.

“I didn’t get any on your new dress did I?” he asked, obviously very pleased with himself.

“No, you’re aim was perfect. But you shouldn’t have done that. If Travis had seen you, he’d have gone ballistic.”

Seth rolled his eyes, clearly not worried by the idea of having to fight Travis, even though Travis was bigger than him. “Party rule number one, Ellie. Never drink something someone handed you unless you open it yourself.”

Seth magically produced an unopened can of Dr. Pepper, which I eagerly accepted. I chugged half of it before realizing his meaning. “You think Travis put something in that drink?” I asked, a little shocked by the suggestion.

“You never know.” Seth shrugged. “Besides, I just don’t like that guy.”

I resisted the urge to smile and tried to sound stern as I said, “That wasn’t very nice of you.”

“Actually, I thought it was extremely generous.”

“How do you figure?”

“Were you, or were you not about to punch him?” Seth took one look at my face and smirked. “I did the guy a favor. Saved him the embarrassment of getting hit by a girl.”

“Still. I was really going to enjoy pummeling that tool.”

Seth and I had a good laugh and when it died down I racked my brain for something to say. I was afraid if things got quiet it would get awkward. We were doing so well at the moment. I didn’t want to ruin that. “Good news,” I said. “My dad’s TiVo-ing the prelims for me, so we don’t have to miss them after all.”

“*We* don’t?” Seth echoed, suspiciously. His doubt made me blush.

“Yeah, well, you know… I just meant…”

Seth continued to stare at me, pretending to not know what I was talking about. “You just meant…?” he prompted.

He was going to make me say it. The jerk. So much for not letting

things get awkward. Me inviting him to come over and watch the fight was basically like asking him out and he totally knew it.

I've never in my life ever come anywhere close to asking a guy out, and I'd be willing to bet Seth knew that too. I wanted to change the subject just to spite him, except that it really would be fun to watch the fights with someone who's actually trained with the fighters. Plus, it might be nice to spend some time with Seth that was actually by choice.

I glanced at Seth again. Yup, still watching me. Waiting very patiently for me to officially invite him over to hang out with me. Except, judging by the look on his face, I don't actually think he wanted to hear it in order to watch me squirm. I think he needed to hear it to see if I really meant it.

I thought it over very quickly and decided that I did mean it. I just wasn't sure I could get it out. *Don't be a wuss, Ellie.* I took a deep breath and let it out in a huff. "I'd really like it if you came over and watched the fight with me tomorrow, all right?"

I cringed, expecting Seth to laugh at how irritated I sounded. Which he promptly did. "You're serious, aren't you? You want to hang out with me."

I felt my face heat up, so I glared at him. "I still reserve the right to change my mind if you go psycho on me again."

He laughed. "Well, then. It's a date."

It's a date? He'd said it playfully, but I seriously doubted he meant it that way. He could barely restrain himself from touching me when he thought I hated him. I couldn't even imagine what he'd be like if he thought it was okay. "Come to think of it," I said, my stomach caving in on itself. "That's probably not a good idea. Never mind."

"Ellie, I promise I won't 'go psycho' on you."

"It's not you I'm worried about. Well, not only you. If you come over acting all obsessed-lovesick-stalkerish the way you do…" Seth frowned at my choice of words, but hey, sometimes the truth hurts. "Sorry, but you do," I said, "and I seriously doubt my dad could handle it. Especially not right now. He didn't exactly take Angela's stupid makeover with grace. He almost didn't let me out of the house for my own birthday party."

Seth forgot about my insult and laughed. "Well I can't really blame him for that. I wouldn't have wanted to let you go either."

He reached out and absently pulled a strand of my hair through his fingers. I was surprised when I didn't flinch away from him. "You look beautiful tonight," he said. "I really do like your hair down around your face like this."

He twisted my hair around his finger and then let it fall against my cheek. Then he took a moment to look me over from head to toe and

frowned in thought. “Interestingly enough, I could do without the dress. It looks great, but I like you best when you’re completely in your comfort zone, even if that is just a t-shirt and jeans. There’s nothing sexier than your confidence.”

I couldn’t have covered up my shock if my life had depended on it. No one’s ever even said the word sexy in front of me, much less used it as a way to describe me.

“Actually,” Seth said, smiling at the expression on my face. “Your innocence is pretty sexy, too.”

I wished he’d stop using that word. It was making me incredibly nervous, and my nerves only ever seem to encourage Seth. Which was what was happening right now. He’d turned toward me, putting one arm on the back of the swing behind me, and was officially leaning in. “Dangerously sexy.” And there was that word again. “It makes me want to do… things…”

“Um, *things*?” *Saturday Night Slasher type things? Or hormonal teenage boy type things?*

“Fun things,” Seth assured me. As if that answered my question.

Seth’s gaze kept fluttering back and forth between my eyes and my mouth. *Okay,* this *is it,* I told myself. Now *he’s going to kiss you. If you don’t want it, you’d better stop him now.*

Yeah, as if I could have done anything to stop him? I was frozen stiff. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even breathe. All I knew was that for every part of me that was screaming to run from him, there was as much a part of me that straight-up wanted him.

I waited, holding my breath and trembling enough that Seth had to have felt it, but he didn’t make a move. I couldn’t understand. Why didn’t he just do it? He clearly wanted to, and I wasn’t giving off any stay-away-from-me vibes this time. At least, I don’t think I was.

Somehow, Seth knew exactly what I was thinking. “Not now, Ellie. You’re still not quite ready.”

I let out the breath I’d been holding. Relief? Disappointment?

Relief.

Definitely relief.

Well, more relief than disappointment.

“Don’t worry,” Seth continued. “When you are ready, I won’t hesitate.”

Seth sat back, allowing the mood to lighten again. He laughed and said, “But I’ll probably lock your sister in a closet first. Have you noticed how she’s been everywhere tonight?”

This made me laugh, and I was beyond glad to have the tension gone. “Of course she has,” I said. “She’s trying very hard to keep you away from me.”

“Why? I thought she was on my side.”

"She was," I assured him.

"Was?"

I nodded. "She's over you. Sorry. Don't take it personally. Angela's very fickle. Plus, she just got really tired of me fighting her about you and has moved on to someone she thinks I won't resist as much."

Boy was that ever the wrong thing to say. Seth's eyes narrowed severely. "She's trying to set you up with Mister-we're-just-friends-even-though-I'll-let-him-walk-me-home-and-cuddle-on-the-couch-together!" he accused, outraged.

"Some people call him *Dave*," I snapped, annoyed with his attitude. "And we were not cuddling."

Seth's eye-roll was over the top. "Please. You were in his lap."

"I was pushed! And that was your fault anyway. It was your stupid jealousy in the diner that gave Angela the idea in the first place."

"That was completely justified," Seth argued. "You were sharing the guy's fries when you were supposed to be out with me."

Okay, that was true. And it was completely rude of me—that's kind of why I'd done it. "Whatever," I said, waving dismissively. "Why are we arguing about this anyway?"

Seth's anger vanished and was replaced with a strange desperation. "Because you're going to fall for him, Ellie. I've seen the two of you together and Angela's right. If she's really trying to hook you guys up, he won't need much convincing and you won't resist him."

Seth looked so worried that Dave was going to steal me away from him that I almost laughed. It was kind of adorable. I dropped my attitude and teased, "I resist you just fine, don't I?"

"For now. But you can't keep it up forever."

That sounded a bit like a threat, so in an attempt to keep the mood light I said, "Unless, like you said, Angela convinces Dave that he likes me and he sweeps me off my feet before you manage it."

"Dave can't have you!" Seth exploded, his temper finally getting the better of him. "I won't let him!"

He was taking on that psycho-stalker trait again, so I scooted away from him as far as I could. "Okay, Seth? Maybe we should just keep the conversations short for now. Work our way up to being friends."

"Ellie, wait!" Seth grabbed hold of my wrist before I could leave. "I'm sorry." He took a deep breath, willing himself to calm down. "I'm sorry," he said again. He was so frustrated he had a hard time finding words. "I… It's just that Dave… You don't… If he needs Angela to point out to him how special you are, then he doesn't deserve you."

I didn't know what to say. It was probably the nicest thing anyone had ever said to me. Definitely the most romantic. I was blushing and I didn't even care.

Seth let go of my wrist and instead pulled one of my hands into

both of his. “Ellie, I don’t think you understand how much—”

“Ellie!” Angela shouted, appearing out of thin air. “Are you trying to be the worst guest-of-honor ever?”

Dave was with my sister again. He let her do the talking and just settled for eying me curiously. His gaze slid to Seth and his look went from careful to suspicious.

I looked back at Seth just in time to see him slump back in defeat. He stared down at his empty hands and I realized I’d yanked mine free of them the second I’d heard my sister’s voice. Seth’s disappointment made me wish there was some way I could put it back. Not to mention, now I didn’t have any idea what he’d been about to say. And I wanted to know. I wanted to know bad. *Thanks a lot, Angela.*

“Why are you hiding out here?” Angela asked.

“I’m not hiding from anyone. Do you see me hiding? Though, I probably *should* be hiding from Travis.”

“Well, stop doing it anyway. It’s cake time. You have to come blow out the candles.”

I groaned. “Ugh. Can’t you just do it without me? Everyone who even cares that I’m at this party is right here.”

Angela threw her hands up in the air. “Seriously. Why do I even bother?” She threw a desperate look at Dave. “A little help here?”

Dave laughed and stretched out his hand to me. “Suck it up, Westley. Fifteen more minutes. Blow out some candles, eat some cake, and then I’ll take you home.”

I let Dave pull me to my feet and Seth immediately followed suit. I gave him a “what can you do?” look and then headed back inside. I got about four feet before Dave tugged me to a stop. “Hold up a minute.”

Seth stopped at the sound of Dave’s voice, but before either of us could question what was going on, Angela linked her arm through Seth’s. “Come on, you can help me light the candles,” she told him. A little too enthusiastically.

Seth looked back at me as Angela dragged him inside. He was daring me to stop my sister, to save him and even claim him, but I couldn’t. I was too thrown by the fact that Dave was holding me back for some reason. Even weirder, he hadn’t grabbed me by the shoulder or ponytail or something—he’d grabbed my hand. And was still holding it.

“What’s the problem?” I asked, pulling my hand to safety.

“There’s no problem, exactly.”

Dave was totally up to something. He glanced back at the house where everyone was gathering just on the other side of the sliding glass door. I waited expectantly, and when he turned back to me he said, “Chill for like two minutes, Westley.”

“Dude. I really don’t think I can handle any more surprises tonight, so if they’re up to something in there, just take me home now.”

“Nah, it’s nothing like that. I just wanted to talk to you.” Dave shrugged awkwardly. “I was talking to Angela just now.”

“Yeah?” I snorted a laugh. “She make you stupider? Cause she has that effect on people.”

I didn’t understand the smirk Dave gave me for that, but he grinned and then said, “I guess we’re about to find out.”

And then, suddenly, Dave Holcomb was kissing me.

Dave Holcomb!

Kissing!

ME!

I wasn’t sure how it happened, or why, but his lips were most definitely on mine. At first I was so confused that I couldn’t move. But then Dave nudged my upper lip with his, urging my lips to part, and my body was in such a state of shock that it could do nothing but follow orders.

I may have been doing it badly, but I was kissing him back. Dave! My first kiss was with Dave Holcomb. It had my head reeling. But not in the way first kisses are supposed to make your head spin, I’m pretty sure. Otherwise kissing would be highly overrated.

I have no idea how long we stood there kissing, but after it was over it felt like an eternity before anybody said anything. Dave pulled back and watched me with a careful expression, waiting for some kind of response—any kind of response—from me. He didn’t get one. I could only stand there gaping at him.

Eventually he wrinkled his nose and said, “Weird, right?”

“You think?” I gasped. “Why would you do that?”

“I don’t know. It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“Congratulations. Angela did make you stupider.”

“Whatever. You’re the one who brought it up earlier. I blame you.” Dave laughed. “I’d never even thought about it before that.”

“I told you my sister was trying to hook us up and you thought it was a *good idea?*”

“Well, no. Not at first. But then I talked to Angela, and I don’t know. She made it make sense. I kind of like the idea of a girlfriend who can hold her own in a game of one-on-one and would happily watch a fight with me. I figured it couldn’t hurt to give it a shot.”

Except it had hurt. Dave Holcomb had stolen my first kiss. Stolen it and ruined it—not that he seemed aware of the fact.

I never figured I’d be the kind of girl who would care about something like that, but I was surprisingly upset. I wasn’t about to let Dave see how I felt, though, so I shook my head, almost pityingly, and muttered, “Come on, moron. I need some cake.”

I walked into Rachel's house hoping to go find Seth, but couldn't get past the wall of people gaping at Dave and me. I gave Dave a this-is-your-fault-take-care-of-it look, but the dillweed loves to torture me, so all he did was throw an arm around me, smile at our audience, and say, "Someone said there was cake?"

I quickly blew out my candles, scarfed down a piece of cake, and then made Dave take me home. There was still twenty minutes until curfew, so I figured Angela would put up a fuss, but she actually didn't. In fact, she was so willing to accommodate me that I couldn't help being suspicious.

I found her sitting on the same stairs Seth had nearly kissed me on earlier. When she saw me she jumped to her feet and said "You ready to go?" before I even had to ask. Then she gave up shotgun automatically and didn't say a word on the drive home except to thank Dave for his help. She pounced on me the minute I got in the house, though. She started to say something—I assume about Dave—but then my mom walked in the room excited to hear the details about the party.

"Why don't you tell her, since my life is more your business than mine anyway," I hissed at Angela. I surprised us all with how venomous I sounded—guess I was still more than a little pissed. "I'm going to bed."

I don't know why, but I half-expected I'd find Seth in my room when I got there and was disappointed when I didn't. I slammed my door as a warning for Angela to stay away and then went to my window. Seth's car wasn't back yet.

I sighed. Seth had disappeared from the party before I got the chance to find him, and I knew he had to be mad. I waited up for a while, hoping he'd come home and I could explain. I wanted him to know that there wasn't anything between Dave and me. More than that, I *needed* him to know the truth.

I don't know why, because I've constantly been hurting his feelings since I met him—sometimes intentionally—but this time I couldn't stand the thought that I'd hurt him. There's no way he hadn't seen what happened. And after what he'd said about Dave not deserving me, seeing that kiss had to hurt. Especially when he could have kissed me first and restrained himself.

I waited for over an hour, but Seth never came home and I fell into a restless sleep.

Joe Louis Arena, home of the Detroit Red Wings, is ice that I've never had the privilege of sailing across. That's how I knew I was dreaming. So when a dark figure in a red and white jersey with a goalie mask appeared I hoped it was Chris Osgood or someone come to give me a few pointers.

As the figure got closer, I realized I wasn't having a dream. This was a nightmare, and the man coming at me was the Saturday Night Slasher. I tried to escape, but suddenly I was tied to the crossbar of my net. The Slasher lifted his knife to my face and slid it down to my throat. He laughed a deep, menacing laugh when I started screaming, but instead of slicing through my skin he dropped his knife and started kissing me. When he pulled away the hockey mask was gone, and I was staring into the laughing eyes of Dave Holcomb. "Wow, Westley," he said. "You really suck at kissing. Looks like you're going to need a lot of practice."

Behind Dave, a long line of Saturday Night Slashers formed, each waiting their turn to torture me with kisses. I started screaming and thrashing, but couldn't escape and Slasher Dave kissed me over and over again.

The torture didn't end until I'd thrashed so hard I woke up on the floor in a tangled heap of sheets. I barely had time to figure out where I was before my dad came bursting into my bedroom in his boxers, gripping a nine iron. Angela and my mom wandered in behind him, looking equally scared. "Sorry," I said, picking myself up off the floor. "It was just a dream."

"Pretty intense dream," Angela grumbled.

My mom yawned, but smiled sympathetically. "You want to talk about it?"

Um, no. I definitely didn't want to talk about a dream where the primary form of torture was kissing. Especially not with my mother. "I'm good," I said, praying I didn't blush. "Go back to bed. I'm sorry for scaring everyone."

Mom managed a "good night" through a heavy yawn, and my Dad double-checked the security of my bedroom window without saying a word. He didn't know I'd been locking it ever since the day I realized

Seth might come through it. “All serial killer proof?” I asked, but my joke fell flat when my dad couldn’t muster a smile.

The look on my Dad’s face told me he’d had plenty of his own nightmares about the Saturday Night Slasher. And I’m quite sure his didn’t end in kissing. “I’m all right,” I assured him when he looked ready to camp out the rest of the night at the foot of my bed. “Go back to sleep, Dad.”

“I love you, kiddo,” he whispered, kissing my forehead.

Declarations of love are definitely not my thing, but I choked out a “you too, Dad,” anyway.

As soon as my parents were gone I glared at Angela, wondering what she was still doing in my room. “What was your dream about?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said quickly. No way did I want to get into that with Angela.

“Was it about Seth?”

“Give it a rest, Angela. I’m not talking to you right now. It’s four thirty in the morning. Go back to bed.”

“Can’t sleep,” she told me, ignoring my anger. “You’re not the only one having nightmares about Seth tonight.”

“I wasn’t dreaming about Seth.” *For once.* “Wait. Why were *you* having nightmares about Seth?”

Angela glanced out my window across the street and then sank to my bed. “I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you before when you tried to tell me Seth was crazy.”

“Seth’s not crazy, and did you really just apologize to me? What the freak happened?”

“Tonight, after he saw you and Dave together, he was so mad.”

Angela can be so blond. “Of course he was.”

“He punched his fist through Rachel’s living room wall.”

“Big deal.” I shrugged. “I’ve put my fist through the kitchen wall and the family room wall. And remember that time I put my foot through my bedroom door?”

“You don’t understand. I felt really bad for him because he likes you, and Dave sort of won you and—”

“Whoa, whoa, Dave didn’t win anything. I *told* you we’re—”

“—and he looked so upset, so I went to talk to him and he—he—he grabbed me.”

“—just friends—wait. Seth *hurt* you?”

Angela frowned. “Well, no,” she admitted. “But he grabbed me and trapped me against the wall. He was so mad. And you were right about him. He really is the killer and now you’re next on his list and it’s all my fault.”

“Wow. So this is what I sounded like when I accused Seth of being a

serial killer. You're right. I was crazy."

"Ellie, his exact words were, 'your selfishness just killed your sister.'"

I wanted to tell Angela she was crazy, but I found myself smiling instead. How did Seth know? How did he know I was so upset tonight? *Because he knows me*, I thought. Angela shook me—literally shook me by the shoulders—from my thoughts. "Ellie, he admitted right out that he was going to kill you."

"I don't think that's what he—"

"Don't you see?" Angela interrupted. "He never wanted to come after you before because he liked you. But now that you're with Dave, he can't have you, so he's going to come after you next."

It was hard not to laugh at her. "I'm going back to sleep. Talk to me tomorrow when you're being less stupid," I said, even though I had been thinking those exact same kinds of thoughts just days ago.

I slept in, since I had no desire to go to the park after all the guys witnessed Dave's Angela-induced brain fart last night. Not to mention I was tired from lying awake for hours stressing about Seth after Angela told me how upset he'd been.

Angela was sitting on my bed with my dad's binoculars, watching the house across the street, when I woke up. I glanced at the clock, surprised to see that it was already nine thirty. I jumped up to my window and pushed Angela out of the way for a glimpse of my own. Missing the hockey game was one thing, but missing Seth's workout? Talk about ruining my day.

"Don't bother," Angela told me. "He already went inside."

I glanced at the clock. "But he never works out for less than an hour."

Angela was crammed back by my side looking through the binoculars. "That's because he probably broke his hand."

"What?"

"You should have seen him this morning. It's like you said—he was totally unhinged. He punched that bag until he was bleeding. Look!"

Angela thrust the binoculars at me and when I took a peek, sure enough, there were bright red smudges on the punching bag. But the stains didn't disturb me the way they did Angela—Seth wouldn't be the first boxer to make his knuckles bleed—they made me feel sorry for him. Seth must have felt worse than I thought. I had to set things right. I had to go over there and explain.

"What are you doing?" Angela asked me when I got up and threw some clothes on.

"What do you think? I'm going over there."

"What?" Angela gasped. "Why?"

“Um, to apologize maybe?

“Apologize? To Seth? For what?”

“How about breaking his heart? You know how much Seth likes me! He was trying so hard last night and you sicced Dave—a guy he hates passionately—on me. On second thought, I’m not apologizing to him. You are.”

I grabbed Angela by her collar and started dragging her out the door. “No!” she screamed so forcefully I let go of her. “Ellie, you can’t go over there. You were right. He’s crazy.”

“He has a temper,” I agreed. “And he’s a bit socially awkward. But he’s not crazy. Actually, you were right this time—much as it pains me to admit that.”

“No! Ellie, no! You’ve never listened to me about anything in your life. Ever. Why would you start now?”

“Because he’s not a killer.”

I started dragging Angela again, but she fought back and tried to pull me to my window. “I saw him!” she said.

“You saw Seth kill someone?”

“I saw him do the knife thing. You see that metal cabinet? It’s full of knives. He—he—it was so fast. I’m so sorry I didn’t believe you before.”

“So he throws knives,” I said. “It’s a hobby. A weird one, it’s true. But we’ve already established that he’s a bit strange. I’m going over there. You coming or not?”

I was almost out the door when Angela suddenly gasped. “Wait a minute! Hold it right there, missy.”

I stopped at the suspicion in my sister’s voice. When I looked back at her she was tapping her foot with her arms folded tightly across her chest.

“Since when do you care about Seth’s feelings?”

“I don’t,” I said quickly, but the redness suddenly in my cheeks probably told my sister I was lying.

“Liar!”

See?

“What happened between you two last night?” Angela demanded to know. She looked about ready to wrestle me to the ground for answers.

“Nothing.”

“Bull. Every time I saw you, you guys were together.”

“Not my fault. You know how Seth is. I couldn’t get rid of him any more than I could get rid of you or Travis.”

Angela’s eyes narrowed as she tried to decide whether or not she believed me. Well, I wasn’t going to just stand around until she decided to bleed me of all my secrets—she’s evil enough, I wouldn’t

put it past her—so I chose to use the moment to distract her once and for all.

"Can we please forget about Seth? I'm taking my new jeep out for a nice long drive today and find those so-called outlets you spoke of. I was going to ask if you'd come with and help me shop, but if you'd rather sit here and spy on the neighbors, that's fine."

"What?" Angela perked up, just exactly as I thought she would. "You'd really let me help you pick out some clothes?"

I shrugged. It was going to cause me physical pain to admit my next statement. "I kind of liked the way I looked last night." Okay, that did it. Angela's jaw hit the floor. "Not that I'm going to let you buy a bunch of dresses," I said quickly, "but we both know I can't pick out a new wardrobe on my own, and I don't really think I have a choice anymore. I sort of mentioned maybe buying some new clothes to Mom and she made me take this."

I went over to my dresser and pulled a wad of rolled up cash from my sock drawer. Angela's eyes widened with excitement. "I think she was afraid that I'd spend all my money on a new car and then continue to go around wearing… well, the clothes I own now."

Seth who? Saturday Night Slasher what? Angela is just way too easy.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted to do this!" she squealed. She practically dragged me down the stairs. "Do you know how pretty you really are? I'm going to show you, Ellie. And I promise you'll like it. We don't have to go crazy or anything. Your looks are more of a subtle beauty. It won't be bad, I promise. And when we're done you'll have all those guys you hang out with foaming at the mouth."

"Uh, most of them do that anyway. It's not exactly attractive."

"But now they'll be drooling over you."

I burst into laughter. "Yeah, right."

Angela continued to ramble on about how for years now she's wanted to make me realize my potential as a girl and blah-blah-whatever all the way to the outlets. But she was happy, and believe it or not, I was sort of having fun.

"Veto," I said as Angela pulled a purple shirt off a rack. At least, I think it was a shirt—hard to tell with all those ruffles. I looked around at all the frilly, glittery clothes and wrinkled my nose. "In fact, let's just save some time and veto this whole store."

"You can't veto an entire store, Ellie."

"Oh, yes I can."

"That is totally abusing your power."

"And trying to shop in this store is abusing yours. We agreed you wouldn't go crazy."

“But this would look so cute on you. You’re trying it on.”

“I’m going to get a milkshake,” I called over my shoulder, already making my way out of the store and back into the mall. “Catch up to me when you’ve come back to reality.”

By the time Angela found me, I was sitting at a table in the food court sucking down the last of a chocolate shake. “Took you long enough.”

“For your information, I stopped at the newsstand on the way here.”

I raised my eyebrow at the bag hanging from her wrist that hadn’t been there before. I was sure it contained one butt-ugly ruffled purple shirt-dress thing. “Well, somebody had to try it on,” Angela muttered. “It was fabulous *and* forty percent off.”

“The newsstand?” I laughed. “Weak. Like I’d ever believe you’d stop at a newsstand, even if you weren’t in a mall?”

Angela scowled and then threw a newspaper down on the table in front of me. I didn’t care that I just ate my words. I was already sucked in to the lead story on the front page. “Mayor of Detroit implements city wide curfew?” I started to read the story. “The body of fifteen-year-old Crystal Chambers was discovered in Maplewood Park in Garden City this morning, upping the death count in the string of serial killings to four. With no new leads, state officials as well as law enforcement are urging citizens to take extra safety precautions.”

“No one under the age of eighteen is allowed out without adult supervision after 10 pm on the weekends,” Angela whined. “The mayor’s urging all the surrounding cities to do the same. Canton’s already kind of lame. I bet we’ll be on lockdown by the end of the day.”

“I think it’s smart.”

“But none of the bodies were found in Detroit.”

“Doesn’t mean the girls weren’t taken from there.”

“I know.” Angela sighed. “It’s just that a city-wide curfew that could spread to the whole of the metro area? That means it’s serious. They don’t have any leads. They can’t find this guy, and they don’t know how to keep people safe.”

I was still reading the rest of the article—thankfully there was a picture of the mayor of Detroit and not the newest victim. I didn’t need another face to haunt me. I looked up when Angela said, “I’m scared for you, Ellie.”

“I’ll be fine, Angela,” I said seriously. “It’s not like I’m going to go asking for trouble. I mean, what are the odds? There are over five million people living in the greater Detroit area. So long as I don’t go hanging out in any dark alleys or 7-11 parking lots, the Saturday Night Slasher will never even know I exist.”

“Unless he lives across the street.”

“So we’re back to this?” I asked, sighing. “I’m sorry I ever brought it up. Ang, Seth is not the Saturday Night Slasher. I only ever said that because I was mad that you were trying to make me go out with him.”

“But what if you were on to something? The guy is kind of creepy, right?” When I couldn’t deny that, Angela went on. “Think about it. He moved to Michigan right before the murders started happening. He has a thing for knives. He’s obsessed with you and you look just like all the dead girls. Plus, he didn’t come home until almost six o’clock this morning. I know, because after you woke us all up last night I noticed that he wasn’t home, so I waited up for him.”

“And you call me a stalker,” I grumbled. I think we’d had this exact conversation before, only now we’d switched points of view. “If you haven’t noticed, Seth never comes home before dawn on the weekends, and if you had parents that would let you get away with that, you know you’d do the same thing.”

“How can you ignore the coincidences? I know how much Seth scares you. You have nightmares about him so bad they have you falling out of bed.”

This conversation was already annoying me, but when I was reminded of my dream I got mad. “That dream wasn’t about Seth last night—it was about Dave!”

“Dave?” Angela, her brain being hardwired for gossip, was completely sidetracked. “Why would you have nightmares about Dave?”

“Nothing. No reason. Aren’t we supposed to be shopping?” I flew out of my seat and headed out of the food court.

“Because he kissed you?” Angela demanded, catching up to me and clinging on so I couldn’t run away. “Oh my gosh, was it bad? It was bad, wasn’t it? How bad was it?”

“Do you want me to give the sparkly store another try?” I asked. I was sorry I’d brought it up.

“*That* bad?” Talk about foaming at the mouth. “Deee-tails!” she whined. “You’re talking about Dave Holcomb. He’s, like, every girl in your grade’s fantasy.”

“Oh yeah, I’m sure every girl dreams of being kissed just to have the guy pull away and tell her it was weird.”

“He did *what*?” To her credit, Angela looked really pissed off on my behalf.

“Well it *was* weird.” I said. “I told you we were just friends. You should have stayed out of it.”

It’s a good thing we passed a guy in a giant hot dog suit just then, and that the guy totally laughed at me, because I’m sure all that padding in his suit cushioned the blow when I punched him, and I really felt a lot better after hitting someone.

Angela glanced down at the giant weenie at our feet. He was now stuck on his back flailing his arms in the air. “Geez Ellie, no need to go all anger management on mall losers. It was just a kiss.”

“Hey!” the guy on the ground protested.

“It wasn’t just a kiss. It was my first kiss.”

I knew that would make Angela feel bad. While I wasn’t necessarily the type to fantasize about my first kiss, Angela totally was. She actually covered her mouth with her hand, gasping in horror like she’d single-handedly ruined my life.

“Yeah,” I said, sort of rubbing salt in the wound on purpose. I guess I was still really irked at her. “So, uh, thanks for ruining it.”

The guy stuck on the floor laughed again. “Dude,” I said and kicked him. Too bad it didn’t hurt—curse that stupid foam suit. “You’re making minimum wage dressed as a giant wiener. I seriously doubt you’re getting any action either.”

Oscar Mayer Boy muttered something under his breath. I’m pretty sure he wasn’t telling me that he had an itch, but before I could beat him senseless, he was drowning in Diet Coke. “Way to go, Ang,” I said, more impressed with my sister than I think I’d ever been in my life. I didn’t know she could be cool.

“Nobody talks to my baby sister like that,” she told the stupid loser on the ground.

“Um, actually, a lot of people talk to me like that.”

“Shut up, Ellie,” Angela said, hooking her arm through mine. “You’re ruining our dramatic exit.”

“Later, wiener boy. Hope that suit gives you a rash,” I said as Angela carted me off before security could kick us out or something.

Once we were back to our shopping, Angela apologized for ruining my first kiss, and then wouldn’t rest until she had every detail. After she had the entire story she began coming up with a list of possible guys to “replace” him.

Amazingly, I had a lot of fun shopping with my sister that day. I continued to veto most of her clothes while she blabbed on about how I needed to get past my bad experience and not let it keep me from starting to like boys. I actually paid attention to some of her dating advice, because I did plan to “move on” as she’d suggested. I just didn’t plan to do it with any of the boys on her list of acceptable guys.

They say a summer romance can make everything magical. Well, let me just tell you that whoever "they" are, they're absolutely right. This, the most boring of all summers, had become magical pretty much overnight because I was in love. Seriously, how did I go sixteen years without having my own car?

Have I mentioned how much my new jeep freaking rocks? I hadn't even had it a full week yet, but it had already changed my life. It gave me freedom. This past week, there was nothing I needed more than freedom. See, I don't think Angela bought my promise to not go see Seth. Either that, or she thought I was completely suicidal over what happened with Dave and thought I needed distractions.

Ever since our shopping escapade on Sunday, Angela stuck to me like glue. She'd dragged me out with her and her friends. She'd invited her friends to come hang out with us at our house. She'd even dragged me to work with her and got me my first non-babysitting job. Not that I'm at all a fan of clothing stores or discounts, but the job had a certain appeal for the afore-mentioned reason that I love driving my car. The job would keep gas in it more than babysitting.

Anyway, after spending the week *not* being set up—according to Angela—with half the guys she knows, I desperately needed some freedom, so I went for a drive. It was amazing. Thanks to the warm Michigan sunshine, the removable top on my Jeep, and a little band known as Sublime, my Friday morning had been, well, very sublime (pun intended).

Right around lunchtime Angela's cell phone rang. The stupid thing had been quiet all summer up until this week, when for some reason it started going off constantly. This was only slightly annoying. Especially since Angela had her freaking ring tone set to a Lady GaGa song. But, since I was in an exceptionally good mood thanks to my sick Jeep—which I'm in love with, by the way—I decided to see who had been calling all week.

It wasn't my mystery caller on the other line, but it's still a good thing I answered it, because it was my sister, and she sounded rather hysterical. "Ellie! I'm so glad you answered. I need you to come pick me up right now."

"What? Where are you?"

"At a minimart across the street from that swanky new sushi place in Livonia."

"You're where?"

"You know the restaurant I'm talking about, right?"

"Yeah, I think so. Why are you at a minimart in Livonia?"

"Just hurry, okay?"

"Fifteen minutes," I told her, but I think she'd already hung up.

I actually got there in closer to ten minutes. At first I didn't see Angela, but then I noticed this crazy person in an Old Navy hoodie, waving frantically at me through the window of the minimart.

"What the freak, Angela?" I asked when I got inside. "You scared the crap out of me. You call me from an unknown number saying you're stranded in Livonia and then just hang up? What the crap is going on?"

"Sorry about the hang up. I was on a payphone."

"A payphone?"

"I know, right?" Angela laughed. "I can't believe those actually work."

"Um, why are you stranded at a minimart in Livonia? How'd you even get here? I thought you were at work."

"I was at work. Ellie, you are not going to believe what happened!"

"You're stranded at a minimart in Livonia, wearing a hoodie in ninty-five degree weather. I think I'll believe pretty much anything at this point."

"Seth came to see me at work today."

Okay. That's not what I was expecting her to say.

I felt this weird twinge of disappointment in my stomach. Not that Angela would have let Seth get anywhere near me, but he hadn't even tried to come over this week. I hadn't talked to him since my birthday party. Not since he saw me kiss Dave. I'd figured he was a little disappointed, but he'd been practically psycho about pursuing me so far. I didn't think one kiss would make him give up on me and send him chasing after Angela. But, it was only a matter of time, I suppose. I should have known. They *always* go for Angela.

"What happened?" I asked, trying not to sound as disappointed as I was.

"Well, he still looked mad, so, you know, at first I thought he came to kill me. But he never got close enough to touch me, so I didn't have to start screaming."

I waited expectantly for Angela to elaborate.

"He came to apologize," she said, as if that explained everything. "He said he was sorry for losing his temper Saturday night, and told me that he's just glad you're happy."

"And what'd you say?"

"Well, duh. I said thank you. It was very nice of him to say he was sorry. I mean, he really freaked me out the other night."

"Angela! I mean about me. You told him the truth about Dave and me, right?"

"Of course not. I told him you were more than happy. I told him you guys are great together and that that's where you've been all week—hanging out with your new boyfriend."

"What?"

"I had to, Ellie. He's a lot less likely to come after you if he thinks you're always hanging out with Dave."

I slapped my hand to my face. "Fine," I said, letting out a huff of air—I definitely had to talk to him now. "So, explain to me how Seth apologizing to you turned into you stranded in Livonia."

"Oh. Right. So after I said you and Dave were together, Seth started asking me a bunch of questions."

"What kinds of questions?"

"All kinds of questions. If I thought Dave was a good guy. How long we've known him. At first I thought it was kind of cute, even if he is basically stalking you. But then he asked if I thought Dave was a good fighter, or if he could protect you. So of course I thought he was planning to beat up Dave to get you, and I said Dave could more than take care of you, and asked him who you needed protection from."

My mood perked up a little at this, even though I guess it shouldn't have. I shouldn't be excited about the possibility of Seth wanting to fight Dave in order to win me back. But I'd never had guys fight over me. The J's have fought *for* me before, which was pretty awesome, but they've never fought *over* me. There's a big difference.

It was romantic, Seth asking about Dave and wanting to beat him up. Plus, it seemed he was still on Team Ellie and not one of the hundreds of Angela worshipers. No matter how psycho Seth can get, he still gets major brownie points for that. "So what'd he say when you asked who I needed protection from?"

"He didn't exactly. He just started asking me all sorts of questions about that guy from your party, the muscley one."

"Travis? If he thinks I'm hooked up with Dave now, why would he care about Travis?"

"I know, right? I thought it was weird too. I told him you don't like that guy at all. When I told him you didn't know him, and that Travis didn't even go to our school, Seth freaked out."

"What do you mean he freaked out?"

"He got crazy-mad like at your party, asked me everything I knew about Travis, and then just left. He didn't even say goodbye or anything."

"What the freak?"

"My thoughts exactly," Angela said. "He was acting so strange. When he took off I figured he was up to something, so I followed him."

"You… followed… him…"

Angela's face lit up with excitement. "Don't worry, we were totally stealthy about it."

"We?"

"Yeah. Rachel was there to pick me up from work, and Seth doesn't know Rachel's car, so when he drove off we followed him. He stopped at the bank and then came here."

I glanced around the minimart we were standing in. The only person here was the guy behind the counter watching my sister as if she'd clearly lost her marbles. "Not *here*," Angela said when she saw me looking around. "He's at the sushi place across the street. See?"

I squinted at the restaurant across the street and could barely make out the guy sitting at a table behind the glass window to be Seth. It looked to me like he was just eating lunch.

"Okay," I said, "so where's Rachel?"

"She had to go to dance, so I called you."

I shook my head, bewildered. "You are insane. You know that, right?"

"You won't be thinking that when we catch Seth and I save your life."

"Whatever. I'm leaving. If you don't want to be stranded, I suggest you come with."

"Come on, Ellie, live a little. Stalk your stalker with me."

"Ang, the guy's just eating lunch. The only thing weird about it is that he's eating sushi, which is totally nasty."

I started to walk out the door and Angela stopped me. "You weren't there," she said, having gone one hundred percent serious all the sudden. "It felt like he was interrogating me. He's up to something. I know he is. Just wait with me for a while. Please?"

I stared at the pout on Angela's face and then gave in. "Fine."

How was it that I couldn't say no to my sister right then? When did that happen? I've never even cared about her feelings, much less been unable to say no to whatever ridiculous demand she was making. Forget the clothes, there were much stranger things happening to me this summer.

On the bright side, this time she was just asking me to spy on Seth, which is something I do all the time anyway. Maybe that's the reason I couldn't say no, and it actually had nothing to do with starting to like my sister. Hopefully.

"Just for a little while," I said. "If he doesn't do anything strange,

we're going home."

"Fine, deal. The best place to see him is from the payphone on the corner that I called you from, but you can't go out there like that."

Angela bought a trucker hat from the minimart and handed me her hoodie. "Hu-uh," I protested. "It's ninety-five degrees out there and this is your stupid idea. You're wearing the hoodie. I get the hat."

Angela smiled sweetly, but didn't give up the hat. "You know I would, Ellie, but—"

"No you wouldn't."

"Of course I would," Angela demanded, pretending to be offended. "But you have to wear the hoodie. Seth is obsessed with you. He would recognize your hair from a mile away."

Crap! She had a point. I put the sweatshirt on and grumbled, "If I die of heat stroke, it's all your fault."

"If you die of heat stroke, can I have your Jeep?"

"No."

There was a concrete bench next to the payphone, so Angela and I bought a pack of Twizzlers and a couple of super gulps and went to pretend we were waiting for a bus.

Angela was right—I could see Seth a lot better from my new position on the corner. He looked much more comfortable than me inside the air-conditioned restaurant. He looked pensive. He looked good.

"He almost kissed me the other night," I said randomly. "I was completely freaked at the time, but then I was kind of disappointed when he didn't, you know?"

Angela turned very slowly to look at me with raised eyebrows. I couldn't blame her for being surprised. It wasn't that my confession had come out of nowhere, it was that it came at all. Never ever in a big fat ever had I offered up information about my life to her willingly.

My face turned beet red. I felt more awkward than I'd ever been, but everything with Seth and Dave was driving me crazy, and I needed someone to talk to about it. Obviously I wasn't going to call up the J's and be all, "So there's this guy…" Angela was all I had.

"It's just that…"

Angela waited patiently for me to continue. I was grateful she didn't interrupt—this opening up thing was harder than I'd anticipated.

"Seth was the first guy who ever…"

I stopped, unable to get any more words out.

"I know you're disappointed about Seth," Angela told me. "But it's really for the best."

"It's more than just that, though."

I was studying my feet, completely unable to look at my sister, until

she said my name in a kinder voice than I thought she was capable of. When I looked up, she smiled encouragingly, seeming to understand exactly how hard this was for me. It helped.

"Guys don't like me," I said. "Not the way Seth does. Take Dave. The other night he said he liked the idea of having a girlfriend who was like me, but then he kissed me and there was just…nothing. Or the J's. I've known them forever and I'll bet that thought has never even occurred to any of them. I'm *always* just one of the guys. I guess I never realized how much that bothers me until now."

"I don't think it ever has bothered you before," Angela said. Again, shocking me with her sincerity. "The fact that it does now is what's making you change. Ellie, Seth is just the beginning. Trust me, now that you're not so oblivious anymore, there are going to be plenty of other guys. Ones who aren't crazy. You remember my friend Marcus who came over on Wednesday? He remembered you from the beach party and actually asked if you were going to be there when he came over."

Someone in Angela's crowd was asking about me? It was enough to make my jaw fall slack and Angela finally laughed. "Why do you think I forced you to hang out with me all week?" Angela nudged me with her shoulder. "You may be a late bloomer, but you're still a Westley. Trust me, you don't need Seth."

I looked again across the street and remembered how I felt on Saturday night. A sigh escaped before I could stop it. "Still. I bet he's a really good kisser."

Angela watched Seth, too, and nodded vigorously. "Oh, for sure! How else do you think he gets his victims to go with him? He's so hot, I'd follow him into a dark alley if I thought I had a chance at making out with him."

I laughed, then tugged at the neck of the hoodie I was wearing. "Speaking of being so hot, I think we're going to have to call it quits on the spying thing. He's not doing anything, and I really am going to die of heat stroke."

Angela sighed, knowing I was right. She started to get up, but then froze. "Unless…"

I turned to see what she was looking at just as a tinted black sedan pulled to a stop in front of the sushi place. A guy in a dark suit stepped stiffly out of the car. He wasn't your standard cop, but he was definitely something.

"He looks like a secret agent," Angela said.

"I'm sure it's coincidence. He's probably just grabbing some take out."

"Yeah," Angela agreed. "But lets just watch for a minute. If Seth's a killer, won't he get nervous around cops?"

"Good point."

I sat back down and watched in complete wonder as the cop entered the restaurant and sat down at Seth's table. The two talked for a second, and then the cop slid a folder full of papers across the table to Seth.

"What the?"

Angela and I glanced at each other. "Do you think that was illegal?" Angela asked as the cop drove off. The entire moment had taken all of three minutes.

"Oh, yeah. Cops don't just give out information to people." I couldn't believe it.

"I'll bet that's the case files for the Saturday Night murders. I'll bet they're in it together. How else could he be leaving no evidence behind?"

I had no idea what to think. I honestly didn't think Seth was a killer, but what the freak? I didn't know what was in that file or why he wanted it. Or even how he could possibly know dirty cops. But I did know one thing. Wherever he was going next, I would definitely be following him.

'Next' happened to be the park in Garden City where Crystal Chambers' body was found last Saturday. "No freaking way," I whispered as we watched Seth head straight for the farthest corner of the park. The girl was found on Sunday morning, and it was now Friday, so the yellow tape was long gone, but I'm sure it had to be the crime scene he was standing in.

"Ew," Angela said when Seth sat down beneath a tree. She was whispering, too, even though we were clear across the park from Seth and he couldn't have heard us in a million years. "Do you think he's sitting in the exact spot where…?"

"There has to be a rational explanation." I mean, there just *had* to be.

"Yeah, it's called he's a psycho who kills girls and then goes back later to soak up their death karma."

"Death karma?" I repeated dryly.

"Whatever." Angela shuddered. "I'm done. This isn't fun anymore. Let's get out of here before he sees us and decides to come after us in our sleep."

I agreed with Angela that it was time to leave. No way did I want to have to explain to Seth what we were doing following him around the city. But not because I was afraid he was going to slice me up first opportunity he got. At least I didn't think he would.

Angela prattled on all the way home about how Seth was the killer. She made me swear over and over again that I wouldn't go anywhere near him, but the day's events hadn't convinced me that he was a

murderer. I already knew he had a crime fixation—he has all those novels in his room, and the way he talked at the car dealership that day meant he obviously did a lot of research on the subject. But that didn't mean he ever hurt anyone.

For all I knew, Seth had a sixth sense and worked with the cops to solve crimes like the chick on that one TV show. Or maybe he was a ghost whisperer. Hey, weirder things have happened—I did just have a heart-to-heart with my big sister.

"Maybe we should call the cops," Angela said as we pulled into our driveway.

"What?"

"Or at least tell mom and dad."

"Tell them what? *That Seth is a serial killer?* Dad would just laugh at you and mom would probably ground you from scary movies or something."

"But we could tell them about how crazy he is."

"Sure, just tell dad that the boy across the street is stalking his daughter? If he knew half of the things Seth's done, he'd move us across the country to get away from him. You want to spend your senior year in Kansas or somewhere?"

I was right and Angela knew it, though she clearly didn't like it. "Alright, fine," she relented. "But just promise me you'll stay away from him, Ellie. Promise."

"Yeah," I said. "Sure, whatever." Not.

I'm going to hell for the lies I tell.

I decided to stay outside for a while and go for a good skate. I'd been so busy with Angela this week that I'd barely had any time to myself. Plus, after wearing that hoodie I was already plenty sweaty. What better time to get in a workout?

I'd just finished lacing up my first skate when a shadow fell over me. "You're late, Westley. The game was Monday." I glanced up and Dave smiled down at me as friendly as ever. "And Wednesday," he added.

I shrugged and continued to tie my other skate. I don't know what he wanted me to say. He knew exactly why I'd avoided the park this week.

He was obviously here to try and smooth things over between us. I just hoped he'd do the guy thing and not actually, you know, *say* it. I understand girls are supposed to be all about expressing their feelings, but I'm totally down with avoidance.

When my skates were on I let Dave help me to my feet and managed a very cool, "What's up?"

"Were you going somewhere in particular? You owe me a game of

one-on-one."

He'd said the magic words. Any tension left between the two of us was gone. I grinned. "I take it you're in the mood for a good butt-whooping?"

I dragged my nets out to the street and proceeded to put my money where my mouth was. An hour later I was sufficiently humiliating Dave when Seth finally got home. "Goal!" I shouted as I sailed the ball through Dave's net. Again. "And I do believe that's game, sucker!"

"Dude, I was distracted by that car."

"And what's your excuse for the other nine goals?" I asked as we dragged our nets to the curb in order to let the car pass. I didn't realize the car was Seth's until it slid to a stop in front of his house.

Dave skated up beside me and gave a low whistle. "A BMW?" he asked curiously.

I sighed, and with a sad shake of my head answered, "I know. It's embarrassing."

I suddenly realized that this was the perfect opportunity to talk to Seth. I'd wanted to all week, and now I was hoping I might be able to piece together some kind of explanation about what he'd been doing today.

Right now was my chance. It was daylight and we were in public, and Dave was there to keep things from getting out of hand. Because, yeah, I guess there was still a slight possibility that Seth was a psycho killer—just a really sweet one. Plus, Angela was inside. There's no way she could get out here to stop me in time.

With that, I became determined. Seth had briefly met my eyes when he'd pulled up, but after seeing Dave at my side he was doing his best to pretend we weren't there. He didn't even look my way when he got out of his car, so I had to yell, "Hey, Seth!" to get his attention. And boy did it.

Seth practically stumbled over his feet, he stopped so short. Then, when I smiled and gave him a friendly wave, he couldn't even say hi back. He just stared at me like I'd lost my mind. I couldn't really blame him. It's not like I'd ever initiated a conversation with him before. Usually I ran for the hills with my tail between my legs.

"Hi!" I said again as I skated over to him, towing Dave with me.

Seth had to drag his stare away from Dave to look at me. He watched me with suspicious eyes, the side of his mouth curving up into a hard smirk. I didn't understand the joke.

Don't let him intimidate you, Ellie. No fear. I steeled myself and smiled even more sweetly. "I haven't seen you all week."

"Yes. I noticed you've been very busy this week," he said, his expression completely neutral. He couldn't help the way his eyes flashed to Dave again, though.

I figured it was as good a time as any to make introductions. “I know you guys saw each other at the party Saturday, but I didn’t think you’d been technically introduced.”

Dave held out his hand, and Seth surprised me by smiling at Dave as he shook it.

“Dave, this is Seth. He just moved here from California. Seth, this is my *friend* Dave.”

Both guys raised a brow at my emphasis on the word friend.

“Well, somebody has to stop all those rumors you started last weekend!” I snapped, so much more annoyed than I’d have liked to be.

Seth’s cool expression never faltered and he said, “From where I stood, it looked like you guys were starting that rumor together.”

Dave bust a gut with laughter, but I couldn’t tell if Seth was giving me crap or if he was just really jealous. Either way, I didn’t need it. If he was going to be like that, then I wasn’t going to go out of my way to be nice to him.

With a groan, I whirled around to go take my skates off and Dave said, “Lighten up, Westley,” but it was Seth who grabbed my wrist to keep me from leaving. The reaction was instantaneous. My arm tensed beneath his grip to keep a shudder from exploding through my whole body. I tried to ignore the feeling.

“Whatever,” I said, and blew some of the loose strands of hair out of my face. In an attempt to change the subject I looked at Seth. “Did you still want to learn how to play hockey? Dave and I were just playing a little one-on-one. We can teach you if you want.”

I glanced at Dave for confirmation and was horrified to see him looking at Seth’s hand. Because Seth was still holding on to my wrist.

“Actually, I gotta get going,” Dave said in a way that made me blush. He smiled again at Seth and added, “You don’t need me to teach you, anyway. Ellie really is the best in the neighborhood. If you figure it out, come with her to the park in the morning. Game starts at seven thirty.” He turned to me again. “Don’t punk out this time.”

I rolled my eyes, but said, “I’ll be there.”

The minute Dave turned to go—which would, of course, have left me alone with Seth—Angela conveniently wandered outside. Yeah, she hadn’t been watching us out the window or anything. Seth glanced over at me, curious of the disappointed sigh that escaped me when Angela walked toward us.

“Having a party out here and nobody thought to invite me?” she said cheerfully.

Only Dave laughed at the lame joke. *Oh, brother.* “Five bucks says Dave doesn’t have to get going anymore,” I muttered so low that only Seth heard.

Seth chuckled and slid his grip down to my hand, lacing my fingers in his. The action didn't exactly go unnoticed by anyone. My face paled a little, but I didn't pull my hand away, and, uh, yeah, that didn't go unnoticed, either.

"We could make it a party," Seth offered suddenly to the group. "We could double tonight. Go to dinner. Maybe catch a movie or something after."

Double? As in double date? I'm being asked out on an actual date?

Obviously another first for me. But could I do it? Could I go on a date with Seth after watching him take files from dirty cops and creep around murder scenes?

I felt Seth squeeze my hand, and when I looked up he said, "What do you say?" with that smile of his. And those eyes…

"Um…" Holy crap his lips looked really kissable. "What?"

"Sounds good to me," Dave said with a hopeful expression. The poor guy. He might be able to snag half the seniors in school, but I'm fairly certain Angela Westley wasn't in that half.

"I'm down," I finally said.

Angela glared at me when I agreed to the date. I gave her a what-was-I-supposed-to-do look, but it didn't matter. She was going to rip me a new one the minute we were alone.

"Oh," she said, turning her fake smile on Seth and Dave. She pulled me away from Seth and locked her arm through mine. "That sounds like a lot of fun, but Ellie and I can't go. We already have plans."

"What are you talking about? I don't have any plans." Now she was really going to kill me, but I just couldn't help myself.

"Don't you remember, Ellie? *The sleepover at Brooke's house*?"

"Oooooooh. Right. *The sleepover.* How could I forget?"

Angela elbowed me, but it didn't matter how sarcastic I was being. Both Seth and Dave knew she was making it up anyway. It looked like Seth was going to call her on it, except that Lady GaGa started singing Poker Face and Angela spazzed. "Is that my phone?"

I laughed at the longing in her voice. "The freaking thing has been ringing off the hook for a week."

"Well, did you ever think to answer it?"

"Why would I? None of my friends have the number. I don't even know the number."

I could tell the phone was about to go to voicemail because Angela looked like she was ready to tackle me. "Knock yourself out," I said, handing her the phone.

She squealed as she snatched it and took off across the lawn for some privacy. I quickly turned to the guys. "I apologize for my sister. I'm pretty sure she was dropped on her head as a child. A lot."

"Ellie!" Angela yelled behind me.

"What?" I asked defensively, but she hadn't heard my insult. She was handing me the phone.

"It's for you."

"It can't be. I told you I don't—"

"He's asking for you."

"He?" Seth asked while Dave said, "How many boyfriends do you have, Westley?"

I glared at Dave as I answered the phone. Angela, Seth, and Dave all watched as if it were the most interesting thing I'd ever done. "Hello?"

"Ellie, there you are! I've been trying to get a hold of you all week."

"Who is this?"

"Travis."

"Travis?"

"You spilled Coke on me at your party last week?"

"I know who you are. How'd you get this number?"

"You gave it to me."

"No, I didn't."

"Sure you did. Listen, we never got the chance to set up a date last week. Do you want to go out tomorrow night?"

"No can do, dude. Sorry. Can't go out on Saturday nights right now. Serial killer on the loose and all."

"That's cool," Travis said. "We don't have to go out. We can just hang out at my house. My parents won't be home, so we'll be able to chill."

I laughed. "Yeah, I'm sure. Sorry. I'm actually babysitting, so even if I wanted to, I can't."

"Okay. Well, I have to work tonight, but we could hang out sometime this week. When are you free?"

Ugh. Some people are too dense for their own good. "Uh, Travis? Learn to take a hint. You're a tool, and we're not going out. Ever. Go drink a protein shake or something."

When I hung up Dave laughed so hard he cried. "Go drink a protein shake? Dude, that was harsh."

I just shrugged. "I tried to let him down easy."

"Did you really not give him your phone number?" Seth asked. Unlike Dave, he was not laughing.

"I told you. I don't even know the number to this phone. He had to have asked around or something."

"He wanted to take you out tomorrow night?" Seth asked again, getting more and more irritated by the second. I was beginning to understand what Angela meant earlier when she said he interrogated her.

"Yes to tomorrow but no to the going out part. He wanted me to come over to his house, because his parents weren't going to be

home."

"Ew," Angela said. "He actually said that? He could have at least pretended he wasn't trying to get into your pants."

"Agreed," Dave said. "The guy's a tool. Why do you hang out with him?"

"I don't. I just met him for the first time that day at Rachel's beach house. Now he won't leave me alone."

"I don't like it," Seth said.

"Well, of course *you* don't." Angela grumbled.

I was shocked to see the nasty look she gave Seth. I think it startled Dave and Seth, too. Seth glared back at her and then went in his house without saying another word, slamming the door behind him.

"What?" Angela snapped at me, even though Dave was the one staring questioningly at her. "He's too possessive of you. You guys aren't even going out."

"If you're so worried about it, do you really think it's smart to piss him off?"

"I wouldn't have to if you'd quit making it worse. Letting him hold your hand and agreeing to go out with him? What were you thinking?"

"Um, I'm gonna go now," Dave said, backing away slowly from our fight. "See you tomorrow morning, Ellie."

"Yeah, later," I said, then took the fight with my sister in the house, where Seth wouldn't overhear us.

"Whatever it is you guys are looking at me like that for, I didn't do it," I said automatically when I came in the house Saturday evening and my parents looked up from their hushed conversation with grim faces.

My parents both eyed me warily. "You know about the city curfew, right?" my mom asked.

I looked at the clock and frowned. "Unless it got bumped up five hours, I think I'm good."

"We don't need your sarcasm, Eleanor."

Mom only used my full name when she was really upset. I tried to recall the last few hours. I hadn't done anything that I could think of worthy of being busted. "Well, what are you mad at me for? It's not *my* fault some psycho wants to snatch me up and stab every square inch of my body."

Mom's face blanched. "Ellie, please!"

"We aren't mad at you," Dad said, sighing. "We're just worried. We're going to cancel our trip."

Well, it's no wonder you're cranky. "No! No way! You are not canceling your twentieth anniversary because of me."

"It's not because of you," Dad said. The look on his face didn't agree. "Okay, it's not only you. It's your sister too."

"Oh, yeah, because the Saturday Night Slasher's been going after so many blonds."

"Eleanor!"

"What? I'm sick of everyone making such a big deal out of this! He's never gonna find me. He grabs up drug addicts and runaways. He stalks nightclubs and dark streets downtown. Tonight I'm going to be sitting in the Haskins's house with the doors locked, eating frozen pizza and watching some lame action movie. Nothing bad is going to happen!"

I stomped up to my room, but could still hear the tail end of my parent's conversation through the vents. At this point they'd decided not to cancel anything, but they were still pretty worried. I hoped they'd just get over it already. I mean, yeah, it's a little disturbing to know that someone is out there in my city killing girls that look like

me, but the more paranoid my family got about it, the more I believed the hype was just stupid.

By the time I walked down the street to the Haskins's house at seven and the sun was starting to set, I wasn't even creeped out. Much.

And then I was right—so far, nothing bad *had* happened. The night was going exactly as I said it would all the way down to the cheesy action movie. Of course, this big summer storm hit, so the wind was howling and the thunder was cracking. Plus, I'd happened upon *Kiss The Girls* before finding *Delta Force*, so when the Haskins's doorbell rang about fifteen minutes after I'd put Cameron in bed, I admittedly felt a tinge of fear.

Without turning on any lights in the front room, I tiptoed to the front door and peeked out the peephole. Standing there, bathed in the harsh light of the front porch, was my extremely hot neighbor, soaked from head to toe. My heart and my head screamed at me simultaneously.

I definitely shouldn't answer it.

I opened the door.

Amazingly, I was met with a smile every bit as grim as my parents' had been earlier.

"You shouldn't be opening the door for strangers on Saturday night," Seth scolded instead of greeting me.

"I didn't open it for a stranger. I opened it for you."

Seth's frown turned suspicious. "You knew it was me and you still opened the door?"

Not sure why my face was heating up, I shrugged. "I was feeling generous."

"Do I dare press my luck and ask if I can come in?"

I debated. It was hard to forget that image of him sitting in the park where that girl was killed. At least it was until he looked up at me through his wet eyelashes. "I promise I'll behave," he said. But it didn't matter. I was already throwing the door open for him.

Seth immediately closed the door and locked it behind him. The deadbolt slid into place with a click. Gulping, I took a step back. *Now who's being paranoid, Ellie?* "So, what are you doing here?" I asked as I led him through the house to the family room, grateful for the bright glow of the television.

"I hear stalking redheads is the thing to do on Saturday nights."

Seth's voice came from too close behind me. I could feel it on my neck. I whirled around with a start.

Seth mistook my unease to be a reaction to his words, and not the fact that he was almost touching me and we were all alone and the last time we really talked he'd almost kissed me.

"I'm sorry," he said, throwing his hands out like he was afraid I was

going to make a break for the exit. “You’re right. Not funny. I’m sorry.”

I headed toward the couch and when Seth followed like he was going to sit right next to me, I kept walking and plopped down in Mr. Haskins’s armchair. Seth noticed, but didn’t say anything about it.

“I just wanted to see you without Angela around,” he explained, surrendering himself to the big lonely couch. As he grudgingly sank into the cushions he muttered, “She’s really starting to get on my nerves.”

“What did you expect, Seth? You scared the freaking crap out of her last week,” I said, incredulous. I think both of us were startled by the fierceness with which I came to Angela’s defense. “She thinks you’re some crazy freak who’s obsessed with her baby sister.”

Seth glared at me, then sighed, then turned his attention to the muted TV—Chuck Norris was busy roundhouse kicking like seven guys. “Is that what *you* think?” he asked.

“Honestly?”

Seth slid his gaze back to me, waiting for my answer.

“I don’t have any idea what to think about you. You can be very sweet. You *are* incredibly sweet.”

Seth looked so surprised by my compliment that I buried my gaze in my lap. “But,” I continued, blushing again. “Most of the time you’re also…” My voice trailed off. I didn’t exactly want to say what I was thinking.

Too late. “I’m what?” Seth demanded warily. When I cringed he said, “Just tell me.”

You asked for it. “Well, you’re creepy. In a likes-to-drown-kittens-for-fun kind of way,” I said with a wince. I quickly added, “I don’t think you mean to be,” as if that would make him feel better or something. “But I don’t think you realize it either.”

I forced myself to look at Seth. He was looking at the TV again. Not watching it—just sort of staring at it. He let out a long, exhausted breath.

“I’m sorry,” I said, feeling like crap. “I was too harsh.”

“S’okay.” Seth still wouldn’t meet my eyes. “I’d rather know how you feel, even if it sucks. At least then I understand.”

Great. Could I feel any worse? With a long, exhausted sigh of my own, I rose to my feet. “Come on.”

I held out my hand to Seth. He looked at it as if it might bite him, but after a moment he allowed me to pull him up. I dragged him into the kitchen pointing to the row of barstools lining the counter. “Sit.”

He did so without any argument.

Seth watched wordlessly as I pulled a pint of Chunky Monkey out of the freezer and sat down next to him. “You’ll feel better. I promise,” I

said, handing him one of two spoons.

I didn't wait for him to dig in. After I took a bite he picked up his spoon, and we shared a pint of ice cream in silence.

Right about the time I wondered what was going through his head, I heard a strange clicking noise. Seth had abandoned his spoon for a butterfly knife and was flipping it open and closed as he stared into the ice cream carton.

I screamed, of course, and the noise from it snapped Seth out of whatever psycho daydream he'd been having. He looked at the knife as if seeing it for the first time. Gasping in horror, he reached out for me when I jumped off my stool, but I was too fast. "What the freak, Seth!" I screamed, running around to the other side of the counter and safely out of reach.

"Ellie, wait! It's not what you think! I'm sorry!"

"So am I! Sorry I let you in the door!"

Seth tried to come in the kitchen after me and I screamed again. "Stay back!"

"Ellie—"

"I mean it, Seth. Stay away from me."

Seth backed away with his hands up. But not in an "I surrender" kind of way. More like he was a big cat waiting for a good moment to pounce. "Ellie, please. Just give me a chance to explain."

"I'm calling the police if you're not out of here in five seconds."

"Look. I'm putting it down." Seth slowly placed his knife, blade closed, on the counter and slid it away from him.

My eyes followed the knife. Part of me wanted to grab it, but I wasn't stupid. It may have been out of arm's reach now, but he was quick and it was still closer to him than me.

"I can explain if you'll let me."

My eyes snapped back to Seth at the sound of his voice. He'd moved into the kitchen with me now and was standing close enough to touch me if he wanted to. Okay, I'm sure he wanted to, but he didn't. Him restraining himself right then is the only reason I didn't call the police or pull a butcher knife out of the block on the counter behind me.

"I don't want to hurt you," Seth said when he realized I was giving him the chance to explain. "The thing with the knife—it's a nervous habit. That's it. I didn't mean to scare you. I would never—"

I didn't hear the end of Seth's sentence because right then a giant crack of thunder exploded outside and a bright flash whited out the entire house, causing the power to go out. I gasped in the sudden blackness, not happy that I could no longer Seth.

Seth must have anticipated my anxiety over the power outage, because he immediately pulled me to him, locking me against his chest.

“Seth,” I warned. “Let me go.”

“I watched my mother get stabbed to death when I was nine years old.”

Did he really just say that?

With that one admission all the fear and fight left me. I didn’t even feel the need to break free from his grip. I was overcome with morbid curiosity. “What?”

Even in the dark, when I could only see shadows, Seth wouldn’t meet my eyes. He let me go and slunk down the counter to the floor. “It was a car jacking in San Diego,” he said. “The guy stabbed me, too, he just accidentally missed my heart. They found our car in Riverside, but they never found the guy who took it. That Christmas, Dad took his own life and I was sent to live with Aunt Janice.”

“Seth.”

Seth shook his head absently. “It was a long time ago.”

I didn’t know what to say, but I sat down next to him on the floor and gave his hand a squeeze.

When his body went stiff next to me I realized that we were now holding hands and it had been at my request. I hadn’t meant to do it, but letting go now felt like it would be a very cruel rejection. I think that rejection was exactly what Seth was waiting for. I considered it, but didn’t have the heart to do it. Instead of letting go, I laced my fingers thorough his.

After a heartbeat or two, Seth finally accepted the fact that I was holding his hand and tentatively pulled that hand to his cheek. He left it there a moment and took a deep breath. I was shocked to feel the tiny shiver that ran through his body. It’s one thing for me to shudder at his touch, but for him to tremble at mine was something else entirely.

“So, um, how come the obsession with knives? You’d think after something like that you’d be scared of them now.”

Hearing the nerves in my voice, Seth quickly let our hands fall back to his lap. He was quiet for a minute, and just when I thought he wasn’t going to answer my question he said, “When I came to Beverly Hills, child services recommended counseling, but my aunt Janice has never done things the conventional way. She said it was better for me to face my fears in the literal sense and gave me my first knife.”

My gaze drifted the direction of the knife lying on the counter. “That one?” I wondered aloud.

Seth understood what I meant. “Yeah. Aunt Janice found someone to teach me how to use it and then enrolled me in self-defense classes.”

“Did it help?”

Seth sighed. “The nightmares stopped. I wasn’t afraid to leave the

house anymore. Obviously it didn't work entirely, though, since I grew up to be so *intense*." Seth let go of my hand and then said, "Or crazy. Or psycho. Or everything else you've called me in the last month." I could hear the frown in his voice when he added, "Creepy in a likes-to-drown-kittens-for-fun kind of way?"

Wow. Those words all sounded so awful now. "You forgot pretty enough to be gay," I said.

He chuckled, but my laugh was forced. The only thing I could think to say was, "I'm sorry."

Seth turned to face me then. I could just barely make out his facial features now that my eyes had adjusted to the dark. It was enough to see the intensity in his eyes. "No," he said fiercely. "Don't be sorry. You're the first person I've ever told this to and I didn't do it so that you would feel sorry. I just want you to understand. I don't want you to be afraid of me."

"Okay," I said, even though it was impossible not to feel sorry—sorry for him and sorry for all the mean things I've ever said to him.

We sat there a few more minutes in silence until, thankfully, the power came back on. We met each other's gazes but the moment was awkward. Not knowing what else to say, I got up and grabbed the ice cream from the counter. It was nothing but ice cream soup now. With a sigh I threw it away and then handed Seth his knife back.

After he took it he grabbed my hand and said, "I don't want you to be scared of me. You have no idea how sorry I am."

I shrugged and tried to pull away but Seth wouldn't let go of my hand. "Ellie, I would never hurt you."

Seth waited for me to say something, but I couldn't find my voice. I nodded and pulled my hand from his. This time he let me go. He sat back down at the bar and watched while I wiped up the melted ice cream that had leaked onto the counter.

"After my parents died I started having trouble with the kids at school."

Seth seemed to be talking more to himself now than to me. "My psychologist said that I'd developed a personality disorder. Aunt Janice thought that was ridiculous and pulled me out of school." He paused for a minute, then added, "And therapy. I've had nothing but private tutors ever since."

Seth began mindlessly flipping his knife open and closed again without realizing he was doing it. It really was a nervous habit.

"I was reading about personality disorders not that long ago, after you said I wasn't normal," Seth said, frowning. "Maybe that guy was right."

"I don't know about that," I argued, though I wasn't so sure.

"It would explain the way you feel about me," Seth said. "And how I

can't ever get things right with you. I'm trying, Ellie. I'm trying really hard. But it's difficult, because all the intense feelings I have for you drive me so crazy."

I'd been about to take a seat on the stool next to Seth, but stopped at the casual mention of his "intense" feelings for me. Seth grimaced at the way I backed into the kitchen, putting the counter safely between us again.

"All I want is for you to like me," he said, frustration creeping back into his voice. "But every time I begin to get anywhere with you I screw up so bad, I lose more ground than I had to start with."

Seth looked so disappointed that I managed to get over myself and plopped down next to him. "You haven't lost all your footing," I said. "I really don't hate you, you know. I wouldn't even say I don't like you anymore. You just take some getting used to."

Seth looked down at the knife in his hand. He closed it, but continued to fiddle with it. "Saying that you don't dislike me anymore isn't the same thing as actually liking me."

"No," I agreed. "You're right. It isn't."

Seth frowned again and there was something so cute about it this time that I smiled and said, "But I don't share ice cream with just anyone." I nudged him playfully with my elbow.

I could feel the surprise radiating off Seth as he turned to face me full on, but I couldn't look up. I was red as a cherry. I couldn't believe I'd just told Seth that I liked him. Granted, he didn't think I meant, "Lets forget the kitchen and go make out on the couch." But I think maybe I did.

"I'm sorry, by the way," I said, my eyes still completely focused on the counter in front of me.

"I told you, don't feel—"

"Not about that—about last week. That whole thing with Dave at my birthday party." My face was now so red, I'm pretty sure the blush was creeping down into my arms. "Angela said you were upset."

"Angela also said that you and Dave spent the last week in Happy Couple Land."

Not only was I startled into looking up at him, but I couldn't hide my disappointment. "S-so you weren't upset about Dave kissing me?" I stammered.

Somebody stamp LOSER on my forehead right now.

Seth regarded me with a cool expression, but the light slowly crept back into his eyes. When he smirked he was instantly transformed back into the charming, confident Seth I met when he first moved in.

"Upset," he said, "is not nearly a strong enough word for what I felt watching Dave steal that kiss from you. If you hadn't started kissing him back when you did, it wouldn't have been the wall I pounded my

fist into."

Seth's face suddenly flushed with so much anger that he actually sneered in disgust. "He doesn't even know, does he?"

I had no idea what Seth meant, but the question sounded rhetorical.

"He doesn't have any clue that that was your first kiss."

I treated that statement as rhetorical too.

Seth's anger vanished as instantly as it had come. "It shouldn't have been like that," he said.

I thought I'd put a ban on the sexy voice back in Seth's bedroom, but it was back and bringing a whole bunch of tension with it.

"In front of all those people," Seth continued. "And with someone you didn't even want to kiss."

"If I remember correctly, you thought I wanted to kiss him," I said, swallowing hard. Was it my imagination, or was Seth getting closer?

"But you didn't, did you?" He was definitely leaning in. "I saw the look on your face afterwards, Ellie. Why do you think I was so mad at Angela?"

I frowned. "If you knew that kiss didn't seal the deal with Dave and me, how come you left?"

"I didn't think killing one of your friends would help me win you over."

It didn't seem like Seth was exaggerating.

"I wanted to kill him, Ellie. I came close. Too close. So I left before something bad happened."

Nope. He wasn't kidding. Not at all.

Cut him some slack. He watched his mom get murdered. That's bound to screw a guy up.

Seth noticed my unease and grimaced. "Creepy?"

Wincing, I held up my thumb and index finger about an inch apart. "Little bit."

Seth let go a frustrated sigh and started with the knife flipping again. "I don't know how to fix it," he said. "I hate seeing you with other people. Whether it's talking on the phone with your best friends, or playing hockey at the park, or even just bickering with your sister. You're so natural with everyone—so relaxed. You've never been that way with me. Not once. If I knew how to be normal for you Ellie, I would. Even if it meant being more like that idiot, Dave Holcomb."

I smirked at the "idiot" comment. Seth didn't even try to hide his jealousy. I'm amazed he didn't tear Dave to pieces with his bare hands when I introduced them yesterday.

"Seth," I said. "If you were normal, you would have moved in and immediately fallen in love with Angela like everyone else. If you were normal, I would treat you the exact same way I treat every other guy I know. Think about that. You do not want that. Trust me, if you're

looking for anything other than friendship from me, being more like Dave would not be the best idea. He's not an idiot, though."

"Is too," Seth muttered.

"Whatever. My point is, don't worry so much about being normal."

Seth narrowed his eyes at me, unsure where I was going with this. Where I was going was probably the last place he ever expected, and it took me a minute to spit out my next words. "So long as you're not scaring me senseless," I said, blushing as I shrugged my shoulders, "I kind of like that you're different."

Once Seth got over his shock, something dangerous flashed in his eyes and for once it wasn't anger. It was… it was… I don't know. But it was scaring me in a really exciting way.

"Ellie," Seth said, slipping off his stool. That's all it took for him to be standing over me.

I knew what he wanted. And I knew that this time he wouldn't stop himself. I could see it in his eyes. I could practically *feel* it. This was already a better kiss than Dave's and Seth wasn't even touching me yet.

Seth took my face in his hands. "I'm going to kiss you now," he warned me, his whisper so smooth it gave me goose bumps. "You may not like it, but I'm afraid it has to be done."

Uh, pretty sure I'm going to like it.

Seth grinned as he lowered his face to mine. "You're thinking out loud again."

I started to gasp in horror, but the instant my lips parted Seth threw his mouth on mine, literally stealing the breath from me. It made me want to gasp all over again from the sheer pleasure I was feeling.

His lips were light, but moved with such urgency it felt like he needed this kiss in order to stay alive. I lost all sense of anything but the feel and taste of his lips, except I'm pretty sure that at one point his hands were in my hair destroying my ponytail.

The whole experience left me feeling lightheaded, and when it was finally over I woke up to find that I was no longer sitting on my stool, but standing in Seth's arms. It was a very good thing he was holding me up because my knees had given out.

We were both panting slightly as Seth leaned his forehead against mine. "*That* should have been your first kiss," he said.

"Wasn't it?" I asked, dazed. Whatever Dave did last week, it was nothing even remotely close to what I'd just experienced. Seth had just completely wrecked me.

There was a smile in Seth's voice as he asked, "You okay?"

The fog wouldn't lift from my brain entirely, but I managed to bring my eyes into focus. "Huh?"

Seth was watching me, more amused than I'd ever seen him. His

whole countenance was different—like a weight I'd never known was there had suddenly been lifted from him.

"Do you need to sit down?" he asked me.

That sounded like an excellent plan. When I nodded, Seth dragged me back into the family room and pulled me down to the couch with him.

"My knees feel like jell-o," I said. "Is that supposed to happen?"

The only answer I got from Seth was a laugh and him going, "Oh, Ellie," with a happy sigh.

It looked as though he was content to just sit there with me tucked into his side for the rest of his life, but the fluttering in my stomach was quickly turning to nerves, so I interrupted the peace with another stupid question. "So, um, what happens now?"

"What do you mean?" Seth asked. He was busy winding his fingers in my hair.

"I don't know. It just feels like we should be doing something."

"We are. We're babysitting."

When I frowned, Seth laughed. "You're just feeling restless because normally you'd be running away from me by now."

This was true. "If I didn't have Cameron to worry about, I still might."

"Well, lucky we have Cameron then."

Seth laughed so lightheartedly that I nearly forgot why I was supposed to be scared of him in the first place. He pulled me close long enough to kiss the side of my head, then let me go. He settled for holding my hand, which I think was another physical restraint on his part in an attempt to make me more comfortable. I was grateful for it.

"So, what are we watching?" he asked, turning his attention to the TV. When he saw what was playing he went, "Ellie, you are *not* watching old Chuck Norris movies."

Seth stayed with me until the Haskins got home at twelve-thirty, and it never occurred to me that the Haskins might not like that until I heard the garage door go up. Of course, Seth had it all smoothed over with one sentence. “I’m sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Haskins, but I didn’t think it was safe for Ellie to be all alone on a Saturday night with a serial killer on the loose.”

Mr. And Mrs. Haskins actually thanked Seth for being so thoughtful, then went off about how much all the dead girls look like me. “This is a fascinating conversation and all,” I said, interrupting them. “But I’d rather not have nightmares tonight. So do you mind if I go home now and don’t talk about the fact that there’s a creep out there who would slice me up if he had the chance?”

“Oh, goodness. I’m sorry, Ellie. I never thought of it like that. I’ll just take you home now,” Mr. Haskins said as he grabbed his keys again and headed back toward the garage.

“Mr. H. I live eight houses down the street. You don’t need to drive me.”

“Ellie, Seth is right. There is a serial killer out there.”

“I can get her home safe, Mr. Haskins,” Seth offered. “I don’t mind. I’m going that way anyway.”

The next thing I knew, I was walking down a deserted street in the middle of the night with my extremely hot neighbor who is an extremely good kisser. The storm had settled to just a light drizzle and we walked down the middle of the street to avoid the downed tree branches and flooded gutters.

Even though we’d just spent the last couple hours alone together, the TV had been on, and the storm had been noisy. Now it was really quite. Too quiet. “Did you know our street was originally called Chuck Norris Drive?” I asked just to break the silence.

Seth gave me a look. He’d watched the end of the movie with me, but he’d laughed all the way through it.

“It’s true,” I went on. “But they had to change the name because nobody crosses Chuck Norris and lives.”

Seth tried not to laugh, but he failed. “I can’t believe you’ve never had to fight off admirers before,” he said. “There’s no way that at least

half of the guys you hang out with aren't madly in love with you."

"Believe it," I said, trying to avoid the awkwardness of his statement. "Until you came along, no guy ever even called me by my first name. Well, I guess you and Travis. But you were first, and he doesn't count because when he met me I was wearing Angela's stupid bikini."

Seth frowned when I mentioned Travis's name. We'd reached the street between our houses and as I headed for mine, Seth grabbed my hand. "Come home with me tonight."

"Excuse me?" I was shocked and had to work to control my sudden anger.

"I don't mean it like that," Seth said. Lucky for him, he looked sincere. I've punched guys' lights out for asking a lot less. "Just tonight—Saturday night. Just so I can keep an eye on you."

"You weren't lying to Mr. H. earlier," I said, astonished. "You really did come over tonight because you were worried, didn't you?"

"Ellie, you have no idea what Saturday nights have become for me. I have to go find ways to distract myself every weekend in order to keep from breaking down your door."

"Okay, am I supposed to be pointing out the times you do or say something creepy? Because now would be one of those times."

Seth ignored me. "Stay with me tonight," he said again.

"Seth, I'll be fine. Come over in the morning and check on me if you must, but I cannot go home with you. End of story."

Seth didn't look thrilled, but he didn't argue with me. "Fine," he said and walked me up to my house. He quieted his voice to a whisper as he walked me to the door, probably thinking the same thing I was —that my overprotective father was no doubt waiting up for me and wouldn't like Seth bringing me home instead of Mr. Haskins.

"Goodnight, Ellie," Seth whispered, then surprised me by leaning down to press his lips quickly to mine. All that did was make me want to grab him and try to recreate our kiss from earlier. I wondered if he could read my mind, because he flashed me a wide grin. "See you in the morning."

I rolled my eyes. "And I promise I'll be very much alive."

"Dad, I'm home," I said, shaking my father. He'd fallen asleep in front of the TV. I guess Mom was able to calm him down a little after I left this evening. I figured I'd find him pacing the kitchen when I got home. Hopefully that meant both he and my mom would be in better moods from now on.

Dad wiped the sleep from his eyes and smiled at me. "Good," he said. Then he kissed the top of my head, double-checked to see if the front door was locked, and disappeared up to bed.

I was exhausted, too, but the emotional roller coaster I'd been on tonight had my mind reeling. There would be no sleeping for Ellie Westley tonight.

I threw on my pajamas, turned on my TV, and had just settled into bed when I heard the tiniest knock on my bedroom window. At first I thought I'd imagined it, but then I heard it again. I muted the TV and crept quietly along the wall to the edge of the window, listening hard for evidence that I wasn't crazy.

"Ellie!" someone whispered from the other side. "It's me."

If the voice hadn't been so familiar, I would have screamed loud enough to wake the dead. "Seth?"

"Yeah. Open up."

Angela would have been disappointed in me on multiple levels if she'd seen how quickly I obliged him. I cracked the window open, but before I could finish saying, "What are you doing here?" he let himself in and locked the window.

"Seth!" I hissed. "If my parents find you in here, my dad will kill me before the Saturday Night Slasher ever gets a chance. And he'll kill you first!"

"Then stop making so much racket," Seth whispered.

"What are you doing in here?"

Seth made himself comfy on my bed and smiled up at me. "It's morning," he offered, as if that should explain everything. When it clearly didn't, he elaborated. "You said I could come check on you in the morning." He glanced at the clock on my nightstand. It was nearly one. "Technically, it's morning."

"Cute."

"Look. You said you couldn't come over to my house, so I'm staying here tonight. With you."

Something about the way he tacked on that "with you" made me thank the stars that I didn't listen to Angela on the subject of sleepwear. My big flannel *Simpsons* pj's were extremely comforting at the moment.

"You are not spending the night with me, Seth."

"Oh, yes I am. Even if I have to tie you up and gag you 'till morning to keep you from waking everyone in the house."

A small tinge of fear pricked my chest, but I swallowed it back. "You wouldn't."

Seth cocked one of his eyebrows. "Don't think so?"

He's bluffing. Probably. Maybe. Hopefully.

I decided I'd really rather not know. When I sighed my defeat Seth held out a hand to me. "Come here, Ellie."

I eyed him dubiously as he lay propped up against my pillows. "No, thank you."

Instead of lying down with him, I climbed down to the foot of my bed and sat with my back against the wall. When Seth decided that I really wasn't going to join him, he crawled over next to me. "How are we ever supposed to get any sleep sitting up like this?" he asked.

"Newsflash, Seth. There is no way I'm getting any sleep with you in here, no matter what position I'm in."

"Would it help if I take the floor?"

"It would definitely make me feel better, but it wouldn't help me sleep."

"Well, if you're going to lose sleep no matter what, then I'm not moving to the hard floor."

It got awkwardly quiet all the sudden and when Seth reached over to take my hand in his I was already tense. I flinched just enough to make Seth frown. He pulled his hand back to his own lap and closed his eyes. "I'm confused," he admitted, trying very hard to control whatever emotion was escaping him at the moment. "I thought we had a nice time tonight."

"We did," I agreed cautiously.

"I kissed you goodnight on your front porch less than fifteen minutes ago."

"You did," I agreed again.

"And you weren't scared of me then."

"I wasn't."

"But I'm making you uneasy now?"

"Yes." After everything we'd been through tonight, I found it easier to be straight with him. "It's hard not to be scared of you."

Seth reached for my hand again. This time he took it. "I really don't want you to be scared of me. Ellie, I *swear* I could never—"

"No. No. I know. It helps to know a little more about you now, but it's not just that. It's the things you say, and the way you look at me." I felt the weight of his body perched next to mine, and the warmth of his hand and added, "And how you're always finding ways to touch me."

I looked down at my lap, expecting Seth to laugh at my naivety, but he surprised me with a grave seriousness. "I've never wanted someone so bad in all my life," he admitted, pulling my chin up so that I was forced to look at him.

Oh, great. Honesty. That was a brilliant idea. Now he was touching me, and looking at me, and saying things all at the same time. I couldn't breathe. Or I was breathing too fast. I didn't know. But I couldn't really think at the moment.

"I'm sorry if that scares you," Seth said. "But I can't help it. When I'm with you I feel so much, it's overwhelming."

I gasped and tried to scoot away from Seth, but he pulled me all the

way into his arms. “Not a chance,” he said lightly, his embrace turning to iron around me. “You’ll never get used to it if you keep running away.”

Holy hyperventilation. “Seth, you’re scaring me again.”

“Relax, Ellie. Trust me.” His lips were suddenly at me ear. “Close your eyes,” he demanded in a calm whisper. A shudder ran through my body and my eyes fell shut like they were under a spell. “Take a deep breath.”

I felt Seth’s chest rise and matched the action. We took a couple of relaxing breaths together and then my body basically melted against his.

“Good girl,” Seth said, relaxing his grip. He shifted me in his arms so that I was essentially cradled against his chest, and began winding his fingers in my hair. He laughed when I sighed with utter content. “You see? This isn’t so bad. Now we’re going to sit here until you realize that the only thing you’re really scared of is how much you actually enjoy what you’re feeling.”

“What am I feeling?” *Besides exhaustion and extreme comfort.*

“You tell me. I know you feel more for me than just fear. You kissed me like you meant it.”

“I did?” I blurted.

Seth laughed again. “You did.”

“Oh.”

We fell into a big, fat, awkward silence. I mean, what was I supposed to say to that? Probably not what I said next, which was, “Have you ever noticed the similarities between you and the Saturday Night Slasher?”

It was just what came out of my mouth when I glanced at the muted TV and saw the news reporting something about the new curfews being implemented around the metro area. I felt really bad when Seth let go of me and turned slightly pale. “I’m sorry,” I said through the hand I’d slapped over my mouth. “Forget I said that. I just blurt out random crap when I’m nervous.”

“What did you mean? What similarities?”

“Nothing. I didn’t mean it. I was just thinking of something Angela and I were talking about earlier.”

Seth seriously looked appalled. It was worse than him getting angry. “You and Angela were comparing me to a serial killer?”

I cringed. “Um, no.” *We were accusing you of being a serial killer.*

“Liar.”

“I’m sorry! It’s just that you and the Slasher both showed up in my life at the exact same time, haunting my every move. It was kind of hard not to notice when you both scared me so much. Plus, you both have a disturbing thing for knives. You’re sort of a crime enthusiast,

and he's… really enthusiastic about committing crimes."

"That's not exactly the same thing," Seth argued.

I countered with, "You both have an obsession with redheads."

That finally made Seth smile. "Not anymore," he said. "I don't have an obsession with all redheads anymore, just you."

I blanched, which I think is what Seth was aiming for because he laughed and then held out his arms for me to climb into again. I vigorously shook my head, so Seth reached over and pulled me to him. When I put up less of a fight than Angela being dragged to a shoe sale, and even snuggled up against him, I sighed, annoyed with myself.

Seth pushed my hair out of my face. "What's the matter?" he asked. He sounded completely serene now that he was holding me again.

"Angela and I were also wondering earlier how girls can be stupid enough to go home with creepy guys like the Slasher, who only end up killing them."

"And sitting here with me just now reminded you of *that*?"

I sighed again. "I just figured out how it happens." *Okay, you're not making things any better, you idiot.*

Seth frowned. "Because I'm creepy and I scare you?" he asked dryly.

I smiled sheepishly. "And yet I still opened the door for you tonight. And let you kiss me. And let you in my room. Then I had the gall to be surprised when you scared me again. And now here I am again. Back in your arms."

Seth must have liked hearing me say I was in his arms, because he promptly squeezed me and kissed the side of my head.

I resisted the urge to shudder. "I *am* one of those stupid girls. I wonder if the Saturday Night Slasher ever did find me, would I let him in, too?"

"Of course you wouldn't."

"How do you know? When you pulled that knife out earlier I seriously thought you were going to kill me. Then twenty minutes later we were making out."

Seth laughed again, but I wasn't trying to be funny. "What?" I snapped.

"One of these days I'll teach you the difference between a single kiss and making out."

I was glad he couldn't see me blush. But then again, it probably didn't matter, because he had to have noticed the way my heart started pounding.

"You only let me kiss you tonight because deep down you knew I wouldn't hurt you," Seth continued, finally answering my question. "It took me a long time to gain that trust and you still won't even lay down on this bed with me. Believe me Ellie, you are not one of those

girls. If your life were ever really in danger, you would put up one hell of an impressive fight."

"It wouldn't be enough, though," I muttered. "I hate that I'm so helpless against you. I've never felt completely defenseless before."

"You aren't completely defenseless. You have to remember that I've been practicing self-defense since I was ten. I'm also a trained boxer, a black belt, and I've been through both boot camp and the police academy."

"Really?" I gasped.

Seth shrugged. "Long story, but the point is, I've specifically been trained to take down an attacker and you still give me a fight. Most guys probably wouldn't stand a chance against you. You don't really have to worry, though, because no one is going to touch you. I swear it, Ellie."

Seth hugged me fiercely and with that one squeeze finally convinced me that I was completely safe. Even if he turned out to actually be the Saturday Night Slasher and used his creepy knife-throwing skills to kill a million redheads, he wouldn't hurt me.

I sat there in Seth's arms, trying to wrap my head around the idea of him. All the things he could do. The strange, exciting, and lonely life he's had so far. The tragic past that was somehow romantic. The most mind-blowing part of it all was the fact that he seemed to think I was the one thing he needed to make sense of it all.

I understood what he meant about feeling overwhelmed.

"I can't believe you were stabbed," I whispered, trying to come to terms with the things he'd told me tonight. "Do you have a scar?"

Seth's chest shook with silent laughter and I was reminded of Eric Sherman in biology class. Unlike my old lab partner, Seth didn't seem bothered by my morbidness. He also, apparently, wasn't bothered with nakedness, since he said, "It's not very impressive," and pulled his shirt off quicker than you could say "rock-hard abs."

Sure, I'd seen Seth shirtless once or twice, but the first time I was suffering from a concussion, and the other times had been from like fifty yards away through my bedroom window. This—having him here in my room, on my bed, in the middle of the night—was completely different. I sucked in a breath and tried not to stare.

"See?" Seth said, running his fingers over a small faded pink line.

"Wow, that's really it?" I said when I finally noticed the mark. If he hadn't pointed it out I might not have seen it. It made sense now why I hadn't noticed it before. "I was expecting something more deadly looking."

Seth laughed. "I told you it wasn't impressive. The knife wasn't very big, and it's really faded over the years. You can still sort of feel it, though."

I reached out automatically, but realized what I was doing before my hand touched his skin and pulled back my fingers.

"It's okay," he said.

I wasn't about to just, you know, *touch* him, so he picked up my hand and placed it over the scar.

"So close to your heart," I whispered in a shaky voice. I could feel his heart beating rapidly beneath my fingers. I couldn't imagine someone pushing a blade into it. Making it stop. Killing him. "I'm glad they missed," I admitted.

When I mindlessly began brushing my fingers back and forth across the raised surface of Seth's skin his breath caught, and he grabbed hold of my hand. "Ellie," he said, shaking off a wave of chills. "Be my girlfriend."

"W-what?"

I scrambled all the way to the other side of the bed as far as I could. He didn't try to stop me, but when I looked back his eyes were hungrier than I'd ever seen them, and his chest was heaving like he was having a hard time holding air in his lungs. He swallowed hard.

"I need you to be mine. I can't handle this chasing you around nonsense anymore. These moments we have, where it feels like I almost have you but I'm always wondering what you're thinking and waiting for you to run from me? I can't take it. It's time for this to be a real relationship."

"I… Um… I don't…"

"Yes, you do."

"Let me think about it."

Seth shook his head and crawled toward me. "I'm not giving you a choice here," he said, coming to a stop just a couple inches from my face.

"You're not?" I asked stupidly. So much for all that fight he said I had.

Seth shook his head again and closed the distance between us. "I'll be good to you, though," he said against my lips.

I couldn't have argued with him even if I'd wanted to. Which, lets face it, I didn't.

He kissed me lightly at first, but the instant I kissed him back he threw his weight into it. I had to wrap my arms around his neck to keep from falling backward off the bed, and that was that. I was on my back pinned beneath Seth's full weight. Only this time I wasn't scared he was going to kill me. I was worried he was going to try and teach me about a whole lot more than just making out.

"Seth," I gasped once he finally gave me a chance to get a breath.

He moved his mouth to my neck, and don't get me wrong, I liked it. I liked it a lot. But I hadn't even been his girlfriend for like thirty

seconds yet and something told me Seth needed, if anything, less encouragement than I'd already given him. I pushed him back a little and tried again. "Seth, wait. Stop."

"Sorry," Seth said, snapping out of it somewhat. He brought his lips back to mine for another kiss and then said, "I'm sorry. You're right. You're not ready for that yet."

"No. No, I'm not," I agreed quickly before I could change my mind. Then, for my own benefit I added, "Not for a long time."

"All right," Seth said with a laugh. "Don't worry, I'm stopping."

He rolled off of me then and pulled me so my back was against his chest, somehow molding his body around mine. "How about this?" he asked in a teasing voice. "Can you handle at least this?"

Are you kidding? I'd never felt anything more comfortable in my life. "Yes, this I can do," I said, already half asleep. It was nearly two a.m. after all, and I'm more of an early-to-bed, early-to-rise kind of girl.

"Actually, I could get used to this." Now that I wasn't worried about anything anymore, sleep was taking over so fast I was already practically in a state of delirium. "This is nice. There should be a name for this."

"Spooning." Seth chuckled.

"Huh?"

"It's called spooning."

"Spooning. I like spooning. Wow, I need to shut-up before you change your mind about me."

Seth laughed again. "Get some sleep, Ellie," he said. So I did.

I was out within seconds and slept like a brick. It was the best night's sleep I'd had all summer. In fact, I was so gone I didn't wake up until the sun was just starting to light up my room and Seth was sneaking back in my window—which meant that he'd snuck out of it at some point and I hadn't noticed.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I didn't mean to wake you up." He climbed back into my bed and did that spooning thing again. It was still awesome even when I wasn't half asleep.

"Good morning."

"It's early. Go back to sleep," Seth said as he kissed me on the neck and then nestled right back to the position he'd been in when I fell asleep.

It was like he'd never left, except now he was showered, in fresh clothes, and smelled amazing. I, on the other hand, probably had hair like a haystack and morning breath, and was glad I wasn't facing him.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Six thirty."

"When did you leave last night? I never heard you go."

"About an hour ago."

“An hour? You stayed all night?”

Seth laughed at the surprise in my voice. “I told you I was going to. I wouldn’t have left at all except I had to solidify my alibi.”

“Huh?”

“My aunt doesn’t really pay that close attention to when I come home at night, but I think she’d notice if I didn’t come home at all. She gets up to do yoga at six and always checks in on me.”

“Speaking of parents who like to check in on their kids, you have until about nine before mine wake up and then you’d better not be here.”

“Eight thirty, then. Which means we have two more hours to sleep, and I promise I’ll be gone when your parents wake up.”

Seth kept his promise. Come nine a.m. when Angela barged into my room like always, Seth was right where he was supposed to be—in his garage working out.

Angela let my shade fly up obnoxiously to announce her presence. “Late night?” she snapped when I groaned and threw the covers over my head.

“As a matter of fact,” I grumbled.

Since there was no chance of her leaving, I joined her at my window to spy on my boyfriend while he worked out. *My boyfriend.* It sounded so strange. And it still didn’t feel real. For a second I wondered if it was real. Did it count if he’d simply told me I was now his girlfriend? Or did I have to actually agree to it for it to be real? After thinking about it, though, I was pretty sure I’d agreed to it, even if I didn’t do so vocally.

My boyfriend.

“Hello!” *When did Angela start snapping her fingers in front of my face?* “Earth to Ellie!”

“Huh?”

“Spill it. Right now.”

“What?”

“You’re smiling like Mom at a New Kids On The Block concert.”

“I am not!”

“And now you’re blushing. Tell me what’s going on!”

Seth is my boyfriend now. My drool-worthy boyfriend. And how was your night? “Nothing’s going on.”

I couldn’t tell Angela about Seth. She’d kill me. Though I doubted Seth was going to let me keep us a secret very long. He was probably going to burst through my front door singing it to my parents the minute he was done working out. Geez. *That* was going to be awkward.

Whatever. I wasn’t saying a word.

“Liar, liar. Pants! On! Fire! I *saw* him!”

“What the freak, Angela, shut-up!” I hissed, sprinting across the room to slam my bedroom door shut. “If Mom and Dad find out he spent the night here I’m *dead*!”

Angela's eyes turned to saucers. "*SPENT THE NIGHT?*" she screamed. Thankfully she screamed it in a whisper. "I only saw him walk you home from babysitting. What do you mean he spent the night?"

Crap! "Did I say spent the night? I meant walked me home last night."

"You tell me everything right now or I'm telling Dad."

"You wouldn't rat out your own sister."

"If you don't quit *spending the night* with Seth I won't *have* a sister!"

"Would you chill? It's not like we did anything."

"Oh, my gosh, you're blushing again! *What did you do?*"

"Nothing!"

Angela looked like she had steam coming out of her ears and I felt like I had it coming off my face. The entire conversation was whispered, but we were screaming so forcefully at each other that we were probably both going to end up horse.

I was the one to give first. I sank to the bed and calmed down enough to speak in a normal voice. "He kissed me. I'm his girlfriend now. But nothing else happened. We just slept."

Angela didn't follow my example with the whole calming down bit. She seemed to get even more pissed off. "The freak was getting info from dirty cops and stalking crime scenes and you decided to be his girlfriend?"

"No," I said indignantly. Wow. Now I sounded like a five-year-old. "He just told me I was. He said I didn't have a choice."

"And you didn't think that was kind of creepy?"

Actually it was kind of hot.

"ELLIE!" Angela screamed, appalled. For real screamed this time.

Crap. I really have to fix the stupid filter on my mouth.

"Yeah, you really do."

CRAP!

"Give me a break, Angela. He didn't have a shirt on. How could I resist? You said it yourself, that you'd let him drag you into a dark alley for a chance to make out with him."

"What do you mean he didn't have a shirt on? You said you guys only kissed."

"It's not what you think. He was just showing me his scar from where he got stabbed."

"Where he got…" Angela turned a little green and slumped down onto the bed. "Start from the beginning," she demanded. "And don't even think about leaving anything out."

I sighed. "Well, I was watching *Delta Force*..."

I told her everything. All of it. And she was pretty good about not interrupting. Well, good for Angela. Which meant she let me finish the

story without taking over and making up her own version based on what she wanted to happen. But that's about it.

"So," I said once I got to the part where I woke up to her opening my window shade. "You see how we were wrong about him, and that he's totally sweet, and that it's okay for me to be his girlfriend? I won't lie to you, Ang, I'm kind of excited about it. After last night, I'm not even really that nervous anymore. It's like you said, I think this could be good for me."

I looked out the window again. Seth was now doing pull ups with his legs out in front of him like an L instead of dangling beneath him. Man, he is so hot. *And he's all mine.* The thought was enough to make me giddy.

"Ellie, stop it." Angela said. "No more swooning."

"Why?" I couldn't help getting defensive. Angela was totally being a buzzkill.

"I'll tell you why. Lets break it down," she said, taking on a businesslike manner. "What you're telling me is that your orphan boyfriend watched his mother get brutally murdered, was stabbed, lost his father, was sent to live with a crazy aunt, taken out of school so he never met any other people his own age, trained to be some kind of lethal weapon, and is now forcing you to be his girlfriend."

That about sums it up. "And I'm saying that all of that explains why Seth can be a little…"

"A freakshow?" Angela offered. While I tried to find a better word for it, Angela got up and started pacing my room. "Okay, I totally agree that that all makes sense—it explains a lot about Seth. The problem is where somewhere in that warped little brain of yours you use all of this to see excellent boyfriend material, I see Jack the Ripper or the Unabomber."

"Angela."

"Antisocial. Eccentric. More issues than *Sports Illustrated*. Possible personality disorder—aka sociopath. You know who else was a sociopath? Ted Bundy."

"Seth is not Ted Bundy, Angela. And he's not the Saturday Night Slasher."

Angela gasped as she remembered something. "Ellie, there was no murder last night!"

"What?"

"It's been all over the news this morning. No bodies were found. There was no murder."

"Good."

"Not good," Angela disagreed.

"Not good that nobody was murdered last night?" I asked, confused.

"Don't you see?" Angela asked.

Obviously not. "See what?"

"There was no murder because Seth was with you all night. It's him! It's really him! It has to be."

"Give it a rest, Angela!" I finally exploded. "You weren't there last night. You didn't see him—he's not a psycho. You don't know him like I do. You have no idea what you're talking about, so just *shut up*!"

"I won't shut up! Your boyfriend *is* a psycho! He's dangerous!"

"You're just jealous! You're mad because Seth picked me and not you!"

This is when my dad finally burst into my room half asleep, rubbing his head like he had a migraine. His timing couldn't have been more vital, either, because that jealous crack had pushed Angela over the edge. "Get over yourself!" she screamed and then called me a name that was sure to get her grounded. Dad stepped in between us, and even though Angela started it, Dad grabbed hold of me. Good thing, too, because I was about to rip her freaking head off.

"Girls!" Dad yelled. "What is going on in here? The entire neighborhood can hear you shouting."

"Angela's being a dillweed!"

"Eleanor," my dad said, yanking me across the room and pushing me out my door. "Go walk it off."

"But I didn't do anything! She's the one who—"

"Walk it off!"

Uh, yeah, so that was not the first time my father had said this to me. It's probably not even the thousandth time he'd said it to me. He meant it, too. He expected me to go for a nice long walk—something about me being completely unreasonable and not willing to listen to anyone when I'm really pissed off.

Eh, he's probably right.

"Whatever," I spat, and made sure to slam the front door so hard the walls shook when I left.

I took off down the street in my pajamas and bare feet, punching a dent in our mailbox as I went. I heard Seth call my name, but I didn't look back. The last thing I wanted to do was get in a fight with him because I was pissed off at Angela—displacing my anger is also a lovely quality of mine—or worse, accidentally tell him what Angela and I were fighting about. Yeah, that would go over real well.

I must have walked for a good two hours. Dad was gone when I got home, but Mom was waiting for me, killing the time with a book—probably some psychobabble about how to control your out-of-control teen.

What she said when I came in the door was, "Feel better?"

What I heard was, "Get your butt in here so we can have a talk."

I'd calmed down, but I didn't really feel any better. I said, "Not really," and sunk down into a chair, answering both the asked question and the unspoken command.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I don't know why my mom always feels compelled to ask questions she already knows the answers to. I glared at her, which she didn't appreciate. Again, what she said was, "Your sister is really upset." But what I heard was, "You watch your tone with me, young lady. You do not want to piss me off right now."

"I don't know why you're so worried about *her*," I said, not watching my tone as much as I probably should have. "She's the one who barged into my room and stuck her nose in my business where it didn't belong. She's the one who was yelling at me. She's the one who called me a—"

"She thinks you hate her," Mom said quickly before I could finish my sentence.

"I *do* hate her."

"She said she was just trying to help."

"Well, she should be trying to mind her own business."

Mom regarded me thoughtfully for a minute and then came at me from another angle. "Seth came by looking for you a little while ago. He saw you storm off. Seemed really worried."

She was probing for cracks in my armor, but all she got out of me was another glare. We sat in a silent standoff, which I won. She cracked after a measly two minutes. "Ellie, talk to me. Tell me what's going on with you."

"Angela's being ridiculous. Same as always."

"No, Ellie. Tell me what's going on with *you*. Something's been bothering you lately."

"Yeah, Angela."

"It's not your sister."

I folded my arms across my chest and went back to my brooding. "Where's Dad?" I asked, hoping to distract her.

"He took your sister out to lunch."

"What?" That stung. "Since when does Dad choose to deal with Angela over me?"

Mom finally sighed. "Your dad's great for when you get suspended for fighting, or need help with your slap shot. He deals with the bumps and bruises, or in your case, concussions and nosebleeds."

When Mom managed a sincere smile my stomach churned.

"You're kind of uncharted territory for him right now," she said, confirming my suspicions of where this conversation was headed. "Your dad took Angela because he thought maybe you needed your mom this time. So talk to me, Ellie. I can't help if you don't tell me

what's wrong."

"Ugh! Nothing's wrong with me. I'm fine."

"It's okay to be upset, Ellie. This is a difficult time in your life. You're growing and changing—"

"Oh, my gosh, Mom! Stop!" I threw my hands over my ears and tried not to barf. "I am not having this conversation. I got my period like three years ago, okay? I know about the birds and the bees."

I couldn't take it anymore and fled for my room. As I stomped up the stairs my mother called up after me in an annoyed voice, "If you don't want to talk to me about it, then you should be nicer to your sister. She can help you, Ellie."

Fifteen minutes later my mom was knocking on my bedroom door. I prepared myself for round two of her parental pep talk, but instead she just handed me the cordless phone. "Here she is," she said into the receiver before handing it over. "I'm glad you called. She needs some cheering up. Try to talk some sense into her if you can."

I snatched the phone away from my mom and waited until she was good and gone before answering it. "Seth?"

"Westleeeeeeeey!"

"What's up?"

"Who's Seth?"

"Why do you need cheering up?"

"It's us!"

Getting a call from all three J's at once was always chaos. "I know it's you, idiots. What's going on? Anything new happen at your-life-is-so-much-more-exciting-than-mine camp this week?"

"I took a six pound dump," Jack offered.

"You lie." I laughed. The J's could always make me feel better.

"It's true," Josh said. "Our whole scrimmage team weighed in before and after."

"I won twenty bucks!"

"Congrats, Jack. You've reached a new level of disgusting."

"But I won twenty bucks."

"Oh, my gosh, you guys. You have *got* to come home. I'm going crazy."

"That's for sure," Jesse agreed. "If even half the rumors we've heard are true."

"What rumors?"

"Nothing big," Josh said. "Just that you turned into a chick this summer."

After that the guys started spouting them off so fast I couldn't tell who was saying what.

"You wear pink."

"You flirt with guys."

"You go to parties."

"You got a job at the Gap."

"It's Old Navy," I grumbled. As if that were any better.

"You have a nice rack."

"Watch it, Jesse!" I warned.

"You broke Kowalski's nose so bad he's gonna need reconstructive surgery," Josh said quickly. "We're really proud of you for that one, by the way."

"Then there's the one that you were wearing a dress."

"Forget that. I heard you wore a bikini."

"Bluuugh. That's a scary thought. I didn't hear that one."

"Shut up, Josh."

"No, dudes, I got the winner," Jack jumped in. "I heard you got down and dirty with Dave Holcomb."

"No freaking way!" Josh shouted—obviously he hadn't heard that one, either. "Dave Holcomb? Seriously? What the hell, Westley?"

"I did not get down and dirty with anyone."

"Now who's the liar?" Jack teased.

"Who told you that, Jack? You tell me right now! I'm going to kick their—"

"So you didn't make out with Dave Holcomb? Because *everybody* has been saying—"

"Everybody? Who's everybody? You're at camp!"

"Westley, you're the only person left in the known universe without a cell phone. Half the school texted us about you this week."

I groaned and the guys burst out laughing. I couldn't blame them, really. It's not like I've never taken pleasure in their pain.

"Don't worry about it too much, Westley," Josh said, sounding somewhat genuine. "We're coming home in a week and a half. We'll get it straightened out. We'll have a blanket party and beat you back to normal or something."

"Yeah," Jack said. "Because I'm not hanging out with you if you're acting like a chick."

"Unless you really do have a nice rack."

"Jesse! Talk about my rack one more time! I dare you!"

"Yeah, dude," Josh said. "You're talking about *Westley*. That's just gross."

"Ugh! Bite me, losers!"

It felt good to hang up on them, but not good enough to not be completely pissed off still. I screamed at no one in particular and threw the phone, smashing it into pieces when it hit my dresser. Then I cranked up my stereo, climbed out onto my roof, closed my eyes, and started counting to infinity.

"How long have you been up here?" Seth asked, taking a seat by my side.

"I don't know. Six, seven, eight songs."

"What's going on?"

"Nothing. I'm all good."

"Yeah," Seth said with a laugh. "You've got Rage Against The Machine cranked up to eleven because you're in a fantastic mood."

Remember that displacement of anger problem? I glared at Seth so nastily that he couldn't laugh this time. Without saying anything he got to his feet. For a second I thought he was going to leave me to my foul mood, but instead he took me to Patty's and ordered me a banana split. "I think you owe your mailbox an apology," he said once I had ice cream in front of me.

"Better it than Angela's face," I muttered.

Seth smiled as he picked up my hand and examined my knuckles. "They sore?"

I shrugged and he brought my hand to his lips, kissing each knuckle individually. It didn't exactly make the swelling go down, but it sure felt a lot better than ice. "I'll wrap it for you when we get home," Seth offered.

He gave me back my hand and said, "So are you going to tell me what's wrong, or am I going to have to make you tell me?"

"Is that going to be a habit with you?" I snapped. "Forcing me to do stuff?"

Seth shrugged lightly. "If it's necessary."

"And making me be your girlfriend? That was necessary?"

To my everlasting annoyance, Seth laughed. "Not just necessary. That was a matter of life and death."

"Life and death? What, were you going to kill me if I said no?"

Seth just gave me a knowing smile and said, "I wouldn't have let you say no." He took a bite of ice cream. "Just like I'm not going to let you say nothing's wrong."

"Nothing *is* wrong."

Seth's playful attitude was gone in an instant. "Don't lie to me, Ellie." He had the audacity to make it sound like a warning.

Two could play that game. "You do *not* get to control me," I growled. "I am not *yours*. I do not *belong* to you. Just because you're stronger and possibly psycho, doesn't mean you get to boss me around. I'm not cool with being told what to do. Just ask Angela. She tried to tell me what to do this morning and almost got her head knocked off for it."

"And what exactly was all that yelling about this morning?"

"Angela was trying to tell me I couldn't date you. Trying to make me stay away from you. She thinks you're unstable—dangerous."

Seth glared at me, but I don't think it was me he was mad at.

"Are you?" I demanded.

"Dangerous?" Seth repeated fiercely. "To some people, yes. To you? No."

"Then quit trying to act like you are. You want something from me—ask. Don't use fear to try and manipulate me. It pisses me off!"

I was so worked up at this point, I was about ready to take this argument out to the parking lot. I half expected Seth to suggest it first, but his mood flipped in an instant. I was confused by the sudden admiration in his eyes.

"I'm not going to be allowed to get away with murder anymore, am I?" he asked, almost awestruck.

"You wanted me not scared of you. Well this is me not scared of you. I don't put up with stupid crap, so knock it off."

Seth looked as if he still couldn't believe what was happening. A grin spread subconsciously across his face and he said, "No one's ever ordered me around before."

"Feels good, doesn't it?"

I was being facetious, but Seth's grin got even wider. "You have no idea," he said, and then pulled me to him for a kiss.

He didn't give me a quick look-at-the-cute-happy-couple kiss. It was a get-us-thrown-out-of-the-restaurant kiss. When he finally pulled himself off me and caught his breath, he did that thing where he looks up at me through his eyelashes with a hint of vulnerability and said, "Ellie? Would you please give your overprotective boyfriend a break and explain to me what's wrong, so that I can make whatever it is go away and stop worrying about you? Please?"

I laughed despite myself, but then I sighed and reached for my spoon. This was going to take a lot of ice cream. "Nothing's *wrong*, exactly. I mean, this morning Angela was being a total dillweed, but then I had it out with my mom, too. I also hung up on the J's when they called. Those idiots were just being themselves, but I've given them more than enough ammunition lately to deserve the fire I got today."

"What do you mean, ammunition?"

"I guess you don't understand because you haven't been around my whole life, but this?" I gestured to myself. "The Ellie you've met this summer is not the Ellie people are used to. For some reason everything's different. I'm talking epic proportions. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* different. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"I don't think anything's wrong with you." Seth grinned. "I happen to like every single thing about you." His smile fell away and his eyes tightened the tiniest bit as he added, "Except maybe your fondness for Dave Holcomb."

"Well, *you* might like the new me," I said, ignoring the Dave crack. "But nobody else seems to know how to deal with it. My sister. My friends. Definitely not Dave—I still can't believe the moron kissed me. My parents have pretty much gone off the deep end. 'Growing and changing' is the phrase my mom used when she tried to talk to me this morning. And now the J's will be home in a week and a half."

"Ah, yes. The prodigal friends returneth," Seth said. He'd kept his tone light, but whether he knew it or not, the spoon in his hand was now bent at a ninety degree angle.

"Yes. They're coming home, and I don't know what to do."

"Why should you have to do anything? Aren't they your best friends?"

"Exactly," I said. "They know me better than anyone. They aren't going to be able to deal with me. *I* can't even deal with me. They're the last thing still normal in my life, and when they come back and see me wearing pink and hanging out with my—"

I choked on the word and Seth laughed at me. "Boyfriend, Ellie. Your boyfriend. You can say it."

Except I couldn't. "With *you*. They're going to freak. Then I'm going to get mad at them for being idiots. You'll get all jealous and hate them like you do Dave, and I'll have to make a choice. If I choose you, then the J's are going to want to kick the tar out of you, and when they try you'll kill them. Then they'll be dead, you'll be in jail, and I'll be forced to hang out with Angela and Dave for the rest of my life."

Seth cocked an eyebrow at me when I was finished with my rant. "Thought this all through once or twice, have you?"

"I'm serious!"

Seth pulled me to his chest and I wrapped my arms around him without even thinking about it. This boyfriend thing had its perks.

"Ellie, try to relax a little," Seth said. "Would it help if I promise not to kill them? I can't promise I'll like them. In fact, you're right, I pretty much already hate them. But I can control myself. I won't make you choose."

"You won't have to," I said miserably into his chest. "They're not going to like me now, anyway. I'll be too much like a 'chick' for them now."

Seth pulled me away from his chest. He took my face in his hands, locking me in an intense gaze. "Ellie?" He slowed his tone like he was lecturing a two-year-old. "Do you like your new clothes?"

"Yes," I admitted grudgingly.

"And do you like hanging out with your sister and her friends?"

"Occasionally." Even more grudgingly.

Seth's smile softened. "And do you like having a boyfriend?"

I glared as hard as I could at Seth as I grumbled, "Yes." He looked

too amused with my answer.

"Well, then who cares what your friends or anyone else thinks, so long as *you* like you? And you know how much *I* like you." Seth kissed the tip of my nose, then let go of my face. He took another bite of our ice cream after bending his spoon back into shape.

"Your parents are only worried about you because they love you, and Angela seems thrilled that you're willing to go shopping and let her do your hair now. Everyone else will come around. And if they don't—and lets hope for my sake that they don't—well then, I'll just have to take back my promise not to kill them."

Seth was smiling brightly. "That's not funny," I told him.

"Good," he said. "I wasn't trying to be funny."

When I first answered the door Monday afternoon and found Senior Detective Andre Pierce of the Detroit PD, I was floored. Aside from the fact that the guy was all official and scary looking with a gun strapped to his hip, he seemed to be here to talk to me.

I'd kind of assumed it would be Seth knocking, because I hadn't seen him since our Patty's outing yesterday. He said he had things he needed to do last night, and I hadn't invited him to the hockey game this morning. I didn't think it the best idea, given his distaste for Dave, and knowing how much the guys have started harassing me since they discovered my "nice rack."

So, yeah, big scary inner-city cop who seemed to know exactly who I was when I opened the door was quite the shock. "C-Can I help you?" I stammered.

He smiled with ease. "You must be Eleanor."

"Uh, yeah." I heard my mom yelling at me to mind my manners in my head. "I mean, yes, sir."

"Detective Pierce is just fine, Eleanor."

"Ellie."

"Okay, Ellie. I'm here to do a follow-up on a report your sister filed yesterday afternoon."

"Angela filed a police report?"

"She did, indeed. I need to ask her a few more questions. Is she perchance home at the moment?"

"Uh, yeah." I turned my head toward the stairs and yelled, "Angela!" It was the first word I'd spoken to her since our fight. "Door!" I looked back at the cop, wondering if I was supposed to let him in. I didn't. I just opened the door a little wider and said, "She'll be right down."

"Excuse me, Ellie?" the guy asked when I started to walk away. "I'd like to speak with you, too, if you don't mind. I'd like to hear your take on things."

"What things?" I asked slowly. I was starting to have a bad feeling.

Before the cop could answer me Angela came downstairs. She stopped short when she saw the uniform in the doorway. "Oh," she said, surprised. "Hi." She shot a nervous glance my direction, and

that's when I understood.

"Tell me you didn't! You called the cops on my boyfriend? Are you insane?"

"Well, you obviously weren't going to!" she yelled back.

"Of course I wasn't!"

The cop cleared his throat. Something about a police officer makes you feel the need to obey. Both Angela and I stopped and waited for instruction. "Ladies? May I come in, so we can get this all sorted out?"

Once we were all seated in the living room Angela said, "So how come you're here? I already told the guy yesterday everything I know. And to be honest, I don't think he believed me very much. I didn't think he was even listening to half of what I said."

"Because what you were saying was idiotic," I grumbled. "I'm sorry, Officer, my sister is totally wasting your time. Seth is no more a murderer than I am."

The stupid guy patronized me with a smile and then said to Angela, "It's our job to follow every lead, no matter how small, Miss Westley. If you're truly concerned, then you did the right thing by calling the police. Now, if you could just start at the beginning?"

"But how come? I told the cops everything I knew yesterday."

"I'm from the Detroit PD. Lead investigator on the Slasher case. I have a lot more information than your local department. Might find something in your story that the Canton black and whites missed."

"Oh. Okay."

"So, tell me about this boy Seth."

That stupid traitor told him everything! She told him about how the murders started right after he got here and how at first I was the one who thought he might be the killer. She told him how Seth was stalking me and how I said he'd kidnapped me. She even told him about Seth's knife collection and his aim. Then she went into detail about his parents' deaths and his possible personality disorder. That seemed to interest the guy a lot, and he asked me a ton of questions.

Then Angela went on to explain how we followed Seth and saw him with that secret agent-looking guy and how he went to the crime scene in Garden City. When she told him about how he was asking her all kinds of questions about Travis, this also interested the detective. "And who is Travis?"

"Just some tool I blew off."

"He's this senior over at Stevenson High in Livonia. He likes Ellie, too, and when he asked her out Seth got all crazy jealous."

"He did not!" I protested. "He just didn't like that Travis basically stalked me. Dave didn't like Travis, either, but I didn't see you calling the cops on him!"

"Dave didn't break into your room and force you to be his

girlfriend. Seth is a psycho and a stalker. Why can't you see that?"

"So Seth broke into your house?" Detective Pierce asked. He was taking notes again. He was probably running out of pages in his notepad by now. "And he's forcing you to be his girlfriend?"

"No," I told him, and then told Angela again. "No!"

The cop waited for explanation. "All right," I huffed. "He came in my bedroom window. Which I opened for him! And yes, he said I didn't have a choice in being his girlfriend, but that was only because he knew I wanted to be, but I was just too nervous to say yes. He's not a psycho. I want to un-file the complaint against him."

The detective laughed at me like I was this silly little girl. I swear I was *thisclose* to going to jail for assaulting a police officer.

"I'm sorry, Ellie. It's my job to follow up on all leads. And while the story does seem purely circumstantial, you have to admit there are a lot of similarities between this young man and the killings."

"Well, don't you dare put my name on that complaint with hers. I don't want anything to do with it."

"Don't worry Ellie, I'm quite aware of your feelings on the matter." The guy stopped talking then and studied me with a distant look in his eyes. "It is remarkable," he said, almost to himself, "how much you fit the profile. You look just like one of the victims."

"Heather Monroe," I whispered automatically.

The temperature in the room dropped a good ten degrees. All of us shuddered.

"I can see why your sister is taking this so seriously," Detective Pierce said of Angela, almost admiringly. Then he turned to me, his face full of concern. "I would think you'd be more worried about your safety considering the situation."

"I am." I couldn't help the whine in my voice and kicked myself internally. "Just because I don't think Seth is a freaking serial killer doesn't mean I'm an idiot. I don't ever leave the house alone. I don't go anywhere near downtown, and I'm locked up tight here every weekend. My dad practically guards me with a shotgun."

"Good girl." Detective Pierce finally rose to his feet. "Well, thank you ladies for your time. I'll look into this and—"

"But he didn't do anything!"

"I promise I'll be very discrete, Ellie, and very thorough. I won't go pointing any fingers at anyone if I'm not absolutely one hundred percent positive with hard evidence to back me up."

Something occurred to me then. Something horrifying. "Are you going to talk to him?" I gasped. "Are you going to tell him Angela called the cops on him?"

"Oh, no, of course not." He paused. "I'd ask that neither of you say anything, either. If there is any truth behind this theory, we don't

want to scare him off. I'll just look into it quietly and if I need anything else from you, I'll let you know.

"Don't worry, Ellie, most likely you're right and this is all just a misunderstanding. In the mean time, though, you might want to be a little more careful. Don't be alone with him, always carry a phone and a can of pepper spray, and keep doing what you're doing to stay safe. We don't want anything to happen to you."

Angela and I both watched out the window until the police cruiser disappeared down the street. Angela moved first. "Ellie, I had to," she said. She sounded upset, almost enough to cry. Though, what she had to be so upset about I couldn't for the life of me understand.

I was so angry. I don't think I've ever been angrier in my entire life. I was so angry that I didn't even want to hit her. I couldn't even look at her. I just turned from the window with shaking hands and headed for my room.

"Ellie, I know you're mad," Angela said, following me up the stairs. "But we have to be sure. If it's not him, then the cops will figure that out and we won't have to worry anymore. But if it is him… Ellie, I *had* to."

She followed me all the way to my room, choking on her last words —she was going to cry. I didn't care. She turned Seth in to the freaking cops. Accused him of murdering four girls. I slammed the door right in her face and ignored her for the next two days.

"Okay, look, if you're going to come with me, then you have to behave yourself."

Seth frowned as he threw his skateboard to the ground at his feet. Have I mentioned how hot it is that he skateboards? "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means," I said, lacing up my skates, "that you are insanely overprotective, and hockey is a contact sport. The guys don't hold back just because I'm a girl. If I take a hit, you are not allowed to start any trouble."

Seth's frown got even bigger and he waved me off like I was being ridiculous.

"You're also the jealous type," I continued. I laughed at the glare I got for that comment. "I'm the only girl that plays, and, most of the time, the only girl present. I get flack for this. Always. There will most likely be perverted and/or suggestive comments made at my expense, and again, you are not allowed to cause trouble."

"Hey, if some punk hockey player gets all up on my girl, I'm not just gonna sit there and watch."

"Seth?" I warned. "Can you handle it or not?"

"Just don't go flirting with half the neighborhood the way you do

with Holcomb, and there won't be any problems."

"Being within fifty feet of someone of the opposite sex does not constitute as flirting. Get over it or stay home."

"I want to see you play, so I'm going with you. I can understand the game is hands-on, but I refuse to let a bunch of tools sexually harass my girlfriend, so I make no promises. *You* get over it."

We glared at each other for a minute, but neither of us was going to back down, so eventually we just let it drop and headed to the park. I had to hold back a laugh when the minute we got there Dave greeted us with a big friendly grin and told me that since he and I were both going to be captains today, I'd already lost before I showed up.

I told Dave to bring it, and then turned back to Seth. "That was trash talk. Not flirting." Seth was clearly not convinced, so I gave him my best eye roll and added, "I'm gonna go play. Have fun brooding."

Seth grabbed my wrist as I started to take off and whirled me around so hard that I smacked into his chest. His arms snaked around my waist instantly. "Come on, Seth," I said, fighting a shudder. There was nothing sweet or innocent about the way he held me against his body. "Not in front of the guys. Please?"

Seth glanced over my shoulder, and when I craned my neck to see if the guys were staring, Seth pulled my chin back to him. "I just want to give you a kiss for luck," he said, and then for the next minute solid he turned the park into a place unsuitable for children under the age of thirteen.

The whistles and catcalls and rude comments from my friends all started immediately, but I just lifted a certain finger their direction and let Seth kiss me.

"You all finished marking your territory now?" I grumbled, reaching to redo the ponytail Seth had messed up.

"That depends," he said, his arms still around my waist. "Did everyone over there get the message?"

"I think everyone in the state of Michigan got the message," said a voice from behind us.

"Angela!" Seth said pleasantly. Too pleasantly. "This is a nice surprise. What brings you to the park this morning?"

I hadn't spoken to my sister since that cop showed up day before yesterday, no matter how much she tried to play nice. Seth, on the other hand, seemed to be doing enough talking for the both of us.

He'd been trying desperately to make up for scaring Angela. Especially since I told him she didn't want me to be dating him. At least, I think that's why he'd been so overly friendly these last two days. Too bad the harder he tried to prove he was a good guy, the more it just made him look creepy.

"Just came to see what all the fuss is about," Angela said.

She'd had this strange combination of fear and anger emanate from her whenever she'd spoken to Seth all week. You could tell she wanted to chew him the freak out, but she was too scared to do it. I remember those days. I'm glad they're over.

"If Ellie can give a shopping spree a chance, then it's only fair I watch one of her games."

Bull! She saw that Seth came with me and didn't want him to get me alone.

"Well, I'm glad you're here," Seth told my sister as he flung his arm over her shoulder. "I'm going to need someone to explain the game to me. Also, to keep me from jumping anyone that touches Ellie—she says I'm not allowed to start any trouble."

Seth laughed at his own joke, but Angela looked a little queasy as Seth carted her off to the nearest bench.

It's a good thing Seth and Angela were both just there to keep an eye on me and didn't actually care to see me play, because the game was over two seconds after it started.

Travis was so the last person I'd ever expected to be playing hockey in my park-on my court-that I didn't notice him until it was too late. Granted, when everybody was in a helmet and jersey of some sort they all looked the same, but I looked right into his eyes when we faced off and didn't recognize him until after he illegally checked me so hard that I ate pavement. The fact that he'd intentionally nailed me right in the boob couldn't have been more obvious.

"Oops, sorry about that."

Ignoring the burning pain in my chest, I jumped to my feet and reached my assailant just a second before Seth did. Seth looked murderous, but no way was I going to let him steal my fight from me. I pushed him out of the way and then pushed the guy who'd hit me. "What the hell!" I screeched.

"What's the matter, Ellie? I thought you liked to play rough."

And that's when I recognized him. "*Travis?*"

"So you blew me off for big brother, huh?" he scoffed. "No bother." He looked pointedly at my chest and smirked. "Didn't feel as good as I thought they would anyway. Smaller than they look."

I hauled off and swung as hard as I could, but Travis was expecting it. He caught my punch and twisted my arm around behind my back so hard, he nearly pulled it from its socket. "So you do like to play rough," he said, laughing, and that's when all hell broke loose.

Seth flew at Travis and the blow freed me of Travis's grip, but also knocked me to the ground in the process. Dave was right there to give me a hand up. He asked me if I was okay, but I wasn't the least bit concerned with myself at the moment.

"Seth!"

Seth had moved so fast that I don't think anybody but Travis and me knew what was going on until I yelled, "Put it away, Seth. I'm fine, all right?"

Seth held the blade of his knife against the base of Travis's throat a second longer. "If I ever even see you again," he said, his voice eerily controlled, "it will be reason enough for me."

Travis's face had gone white and the surrounding circle of guys was frozen in shock.

"Seth, calm the freak down! I'm fine."

Slowly, I pulled Seth's hand away from Travis and took the knife. "You see?" I asked, flipping the blade closed and waving the knife in front of Seth's face. "This is what I meant by no causing trouble."

Seth reached for the knife, but I snatched it away and tucked it in the front pocket of his jeans for him. I looked around at all the shocked faces of my friends. I sighed. "Come on," I said to a still livid Seth. "Let's go for a nice long drive or something, but not in your piece of crap Beemer."

The crowd parted to give us an exit. Only Dave was brave enough to step forward and give Travis a hand up. "So, uh," he said to me as he pulled Travis to his feet, "we'll just catch you Saturday, huh?"

"Probably best," I said, and slapped him a goodbye five. Then, since I was close enough, and Travis wasn't expecting it, I kneed him in his boy parts hard enough to put him on the ground again. "Oops. Sorry about that. Catch you guys later," I called out to the stunned crowd without looking back.

It took Angela a minute to work up the guts to chase after us. "Wait! Ellie! Where do you think you're going?"

"To blow off some steam," I said. "With Seth. And without you."

I was surprised when Angela had the nerve to step in front of my path. "I don't think so. He just pulled a knife on somebody."

"He was defending me. Travis almost broke my arm."

"I don't care, you're not going anywhere with him."

Seth's face flushed with anger again. He started to say something, but couldn't get a word in before I shouted, "Why don't you go call the cops, then!"

Her face suddenly dropped.

Almost as if my words had willed it to happen, two cop cars came screeching around the corner. I couldn't believe it. As I stood there, stunned, Angela held up the cell phone I'd left with my other stuff on the picnic table. "I already did," she whispered.

Seth and I looked at each other, and the hurt in his expression was enough to make me hate my sister forever. She knew it, too. She could see it in my eyes. "Ellie, he had a knife to Travis's throat. I was just being responsible." She looked at Seth, who was still so surprised, he

couldn't say anything. "I'm sorry, Seth. But don't tell me you're not capable of using it. What was I supposed to do?"

We looked behind us. The cops were already talking to all the guys. A couple of them were pointing our direction. I laced my fingers in Seth's and sighed. "Come on, then."

In the end, my sister got me arrested. The police took a statement from everyone at the park, and then hauled Travis, Me, and Seth down to the police station.

After hearing the whole story, the police asked if I wanted to press assault charges—either physical or sexual—against Travis. The guy is a jerk, but that kind of goes against the code of schoolyard puck. Not to mention, if I did he'd just press charges against me—either physical or sexual—for nearly retracting one of his testicles. That would open the floodgates for a million other people to press charges against me. Kowalski could probably have me thrown in jail for twenty-to-life, as many times as I've hit him.

When I didn't press charges Seth got pissed at me and we started arguing. Then Travis said something way uncalled for about my "easy nature", and I flew at him. The cops had me in cuffs nearly as fast as Seth had Travis at knifepoint earlier.

Travis and I were given a stern warning and told that if we were caught fighting again we'd be booked for disorderly conduct and kept overnight. But because of the whole threat-with-a-deadly-weapon thing, poor Seth got charged with a misdemeanor and released on bail to his aunt. We were all threatened with court-ordered anger management.

After that I was pretty sure that any relationship between Seth and I was going to go down Romeo and Juliette style. You know, *forbidden*. Then I saw the look on my father's face when he came to the police station to pick me up and my suspicions were confirmed. He was *pissed*.

"I can't believe my dad let me come over tonight. Even if it is just across the street, it's still *Saturday*."

I was draped on my stomach across my beanbag, becoming more and more envious of Seth's gaming chair by the minute. Since we weren't allowed to go out on any kind of real date tonight, Seth demanded I come over and play some "real" video games. He supplied these "real" games and I supplied the Dr. Pepper and Twizzlers.

"I can't believe he let you come over at all. I was sure your parents were never going to let me see you again after the other day."

"At first they weren't going to. Dude, I've never seen my dad so mad. Of course, all Angela told him before he came to get me was that I got in a fight and you pulled a knife on someone and threatened to kill him."

"Like I said. I can't believe he let you come over tonight."

"Well, yeah, but then I told him about how Travis was basically stalking me. I may have exaggerated a bit. I also may have embellished a little about him totally feeling me up. Oh, and if my dad asks, my shoulder still hurts from where Travis was about to break it."

Seth gave me a sideways glance. "You're quite the little liar, aren't you?"

"Lucky for you. When I was finished you were basically my Dad's hero. Until I was forced to use the B word, anyway."

"Boyfriend, Ellie. The word is boyfriend. Really, I promise it won't kill you to say it."

"Whatever. After the B word came up you were number one on his crap list. But you instantly became my mom's hero, so it balanced out. Plus, it helped that your aunt came over yesterday to plead your case."

"She did?"

I was surprised that Seth was surprised. "It was a really smart move. She's really what changed their minds. I thought for sure you sent her over there."

Seth shook his head. "I had no idea. I was gone all day yesterday."

"Oh. Well, she worked my parents over really good. She went on about how sorry she was, and how sorry you were, and how much you

were so fond of their precious little Eleanor, and how devastated you were that we had to break up—that's where the B word came in to play. Ugh. That was worse than being arrested."

Seth laughed at me again, but I chose to ignore it.

"She said you only reacted to Travis so violently because this is the first time you've ever been in love, and you're really overwhelmed by it."

Seth's eyebrows flew so high, they practically blended with his hairline. I slapped my hand over my mouth. "Sorry," I muttered. "I wasn't gonna tell you that part."

We had the mother of all awkward pauses and I kid you not, I watched Seth's cheeks turn pink. I had to get the conversation going again. "After that your aunt went on and on about how hard this move has been for you and how I was really helping you make the transition. Then she asked if she could talk to my parents alone, and Angela and I got booted to our rooms. I tried to listen through the vents, but couldn't really hear much. I think she was telling them about everything you've been through with your parents and all—trying to explain why you even had the knife in the first place. After she left, my parents didn't say much the rest of the night, just that it was okay that I saw you again, so long as you stop carrying concealed weapons."

Seth was quiet for a minute. He seemed at a loss for words. Eventually he said, "She really used the L word?"

"Dude." I nodded gravely. "And it was worse than the B word. A lot."

When Seth frowned I became desperate to change the subject. "I'm thinking I need to invest in a chair like yours. It looks very comfortable." I dropped my game controller and moved from my beanbag to Seth's bed. After a nice big stretch, I looked at the TV screen and said, "I don't understand your fascination with this game. It's so slow. I'm a *hockey* player. I much prefer *Halo*, where I can just run in there and blow stuff up."

"Impulsive, irrational, and impatient," Seth said. "I'm afraid you'd make a horrible assassin. "I, on the other hand,"—At that exact moment I watched some guy on the game fall to the ground, dead —"would make a great assassin. Not that I want to kill anybody, but I've always wished I could try it. Just to see if I could get away with it."

I choked on the Dr. Pepper I was drinking.

"I'm just saying," Seth muttered. "I bet I could."

"And you wonder why my sister thinks you're the Saturday Night Slasher."

Seth glanced up at me, startled, so I muttered, "I'm just saying,"

back at him.

Seth turned off the game and joined me on his bed. “Angela thinks I’m like the Slasher?”

“No. She thinks you *are* the Slasher.”

When Seth frowned, I shrugged. “I can see it.”

“You can see it?” Seth asked horrified.

“I don’t *believe* it.” *Not now, anyway.* “I’m just saying I can understand how she came to the conclusion. We’ve already been through the fact that there are plenty of similarities between the two of you, and you have to admit there are things about you that don’t add up.”

“Like what?” Seth asked. He was still frowning, like he wanted to argue with me but he was too curious not to ask.

“Well, like how you know so much about crime and stuff. You just admitted to thinking you could get away with murder, but there’s only so much a person can learn from watching *CSI*. When we were at the car dealership, it was like you really knew what you were talking about. Like you understood the mind of a killer.”

“Ellie, ever since I was nine I’ve been living with a woman who eats, breathes, and sleeps murder mysteries.” Seth got up and pulled one of about thirty-five paperback novels off his bookshelf and handed it to me. “My aunt is a best-selling crime novelist. When she’s not busy plotting the perfect murder, she’s researching how to do it.”

“So that explains the boxes in your garage. It’s all her notes and stuff?”

Seth nodded. “And guess who helped her gather all those notes. I’ve basically spent the last eight years as a glorified research assistant—a live-in intern.”

“Aren’t there child labor laws against that?”

Seth laughed. “It hasn’t been all bad. Aunt Janice is sort of a method-researcher. You know, like if you’re going to write a book about a boxer…”

“You go train with Georges St. Pierre,” I finished for him.

“Weapons training, medical training, clinical psychology, criminal court... We’ve researched it all. We’ve spent the day in prison, interviewed convicted murderers, helped perform an autopsy. Boot camp, police academy, the FBI—that was the coolest. We got to sit in at the base of operations for an undercover op. I got to meet the Director of the FBI. He’s an awesome guy.” Seth threw me a sideways glance and added. “Cooler than Chuck Norris.”

“Nobody’s cooler than Chuck Norris,” I argued. “That dude’s so bad-A, he can roundhouse kick a light saber and break it in two.”

Seth burst out laughing and couldn’t resist pulling me into his arms. “If you say so,” he said. “But can you understand now, how I might be

a little fascinated with murder? I'm actually thinking about joining the FBI. Maybe being a profiler."

"Makes sense," I agreed. "You may not be good at interacting with people, but you really seem to have them figured out."

Seth either appreciated my compliment, or got bored with the conversation, or just had the hormones of a normal seventeen-year-old guy, because he responded to my statement by kissing my neck. And I don't mean, like, he kissed it. I mean he was *kissing* it. A lot. All over. His mouth was on my ear, under my chin, at the base of my throat…

Can I just tell you that that is way different than being kissed on the cheek or even the lips? I didn't expect to feel whatever it was I was suddenly feeling, but man, was it intense. I gasped and then for some reason blurted, "Explain why you moved here."

"Because you were here," Seth mumbled between kisses.

He pulled down the sleeve of my shirt and kissed my bare shoulder. This was as bad as kissing my neck, if not worse. I shuddered so violently that I panicked.

"Very funny," I said, scrambling off the bed. Seth sighed when I sat in his gaming chair and started chugging the nearest soda I could find. "Why'd you really move here?" I asked after I'd downed almost the whole can in one drink. "Shouldn't you be in some million-dollar house in Grosse Point or something?"

"Research," Seth said, clearly pouting as he sprawled out on his bed. Alone. "She's going for a desperate housewives thing with this next book—Suburban Secrets. But she's never lived in the suburbs. I wasn't exactly looking forward to leaving Beverly Hills for some random suburb, so she let me pick where we moved. I picked Detroit because of it's reputation, and I picked this house because when the realtor showed it to us you were doing homework on your roof while eating ice-cream and listening to Social Distortion."

"I don't remember seeing you." *But that was way too much detail not to be true.*

"I moved here for you, Ellie," Seth confirmed, hitting me with the full force of his eyes, and looking very pleased with himself when I blushed.

He got up, picked me up out of his game chair, and plopped me back onto his bed. His eyes sparkled with mischief as he said, "Anything else you'd like to add to this interrogation? Perhaps you'd like to know what I dream about when I sleep?"

"Um, nope." I had a feeling I knew what he dreamed about, and if I asked, he might just show me. "I'm good now. You've convinced me. You're nothing but a normal, non-serial-killing, teenage boy."

Seth leaned in like he was going for my neck again, but before his lips touched my skin he sat back and frowned. "Does your sister really

think I'm the Saturday Night Slasher? She actually thinks I killed all those girls?"

"Afraid so. Why do you think she's been so crazy lately? She thinks the only reason you haven't killed me yet is because you like me, and that I'm dead the minute you get tired of me."

"That's ridiculous, you know. For one, I could never get tired of you, and two, I couldn't kill you, even if I wanted to."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm your boyfriend. If someone killed you, I'd be prime suspect *numero uno*. Serial killers can't kill people they know, no matter what. It would be too easy to connect them to the murders. If I were the Slasher, then you'd be completely safe."

"Good to know. I'll have to tell Angela."

"I'd be tempted," Seth said, his mood turning suddenly dangerous. "If I were the Saturday Night Slasher, I'd be completely tortured by you."

Before I knew what had happened Seth had me pinned on my back on the bed, holding my hands loosely above my head. "You would?" I asked, still a little breathless from the swift change in his mood.

"Ellie, you are *exactly* the Slasher's type, with one exception—you're a fighter. Your strength and spirit pose an insanely appealing challenge. Every day I'm tempted to push you to the limit, just to see what you're capable of. Not to mention, you're off limits. Or, you would be if I was him. There's nothing sweeter than that which is forbidden." Seth lowered his mouth to my ear and whispered, "It's maddening enough to make even the most controlled man lose his focus," in a way that sent a chill down my back. Then he started kissing me again.

"I-It's a good thing you aren't the Slasher, then," I stammered, struggling with the conflicting emotions of desire he was creating in me, and the fear I thought I'd conquered, but was my body's natural reaction to his intensity.

Seth pulled his face back enough to look into my eyes. "And if I were?" he asked curiously.

"Um," I said, taking note of my compromising position—beneath him on his bed with my hands pinned above my head. "Then this would be really awkward?"

In another flash he laughed lightheartedly, gave me one of his happy sighs with the "Oh, Ellie" attached to it, and then kissed me like he planned on never stopping.

My first make-out lesson lasted about two minutes before the doorbell rang. "Somebody order a pizza?" I gasped, attempting to sit up.

"Ignore it," Seth answered, determined to not let me catch my

breath.

I was surprisingly willing to accommodate his request, until the doorbell rang again several times in a row. Whoever was out there was either panicked or angry about something. “Crap!”

“What is it?” Seth asked when I pushed him off me in a panic and frantically tried to redo my ponytail.

“It could be my father.”

“Would that be a problem?”

“Considering I told him that your aunt was going to be home all night and that we would be downstairs watching movies with her the whole time and most definitely not home alone in your room making out? Yeah, it could be a big problem.”

“Wow. You really are a liar.” Seth laughed, but it turned to a sigh as he sat up and straightened his shirt. “And I finally had you right where I’ve been trying to get you for weeks.”

“Oh, just come on.”

When we got downstairs we could hear Angela yelling through the door. “Ellie! Open up. I need to talk to you!”

I thought Seth was going to go postal. Angela had been getting on his last nerve for some time now, and when it turned out that she was the one who’d interrupted us, he snapped his cap. “You have got to be kidding me,” he said as he flung the door open. “WHAT?”

Angela looked pale. She stared at Seth as if she thought he was going to physically rip her head off if she got too close. She didn’t speak to him, only me. “I just need to talk to you for a minute,” she said desperately. “In private. *Please?*”

She looked legitimately upset, which is uncommon for her, so I decided to take pity on her. “Five minutes.”

“No!” Seth yelled, this time at me.

“Excuse me?” I asked, incredulous. I was as mad at my sister as Seth, but Seth was about to be in the doghouse if he didn’t watch it.

Seth rolled his eyes at me. “You can’t give her what she wants. It’ll only get worse if you do. Don’t talk to her.”

It sounded more like a suggestion that an order, but still… “Tell me what to do one more time.”

Seth glared at me so hard his face turned bright red, but he choked back whatever argument he was going to say and instead went, “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to lose my temper, but Ellie, she got me arrested.”

“Uh, yeah, I was hauled down to the station too, but you don’t see me freaking out. She just asked to talk to me for a minute. She even said please.”

“She’s manipulating you.”

“I am not!” Angela yelled, finally brave enough—or at least angry enough—to face Seth. “Ellie, I *really* need to talk to you.”

"About what? You never need to talk to me."

Angela's eyes flickered to Seth before she could help herself.

"I don't believe this," Seth muttered. He turned all his fury on Angela. "Leave us alone! I haven't done anything wrong. I haven't hurt Ellie, and I haven't touched you. She's happy. I'm happy. Our parents are happy. Whatever your problem is with me, get over it, or things between us are going to get really ugly."

Oh. No. He. Didn't. "Whoa. Did you just *threaten* my sister?"

Seth was startled by just how angry I suddenly was. He was confused and definitely not happy. "Whose side are you on?"

"Not yours, if you're going to be telling me who I can and can't talk to and threatening my family."

Seth's face crumpled like I was betraying him. "Ellie."

He tried to plead with me, but seeing vulnerable Seth appear only pissed me off further. He didn't get to threaten my family and then make me feel sorry for him about it—I don't care how hot he is.

I instinctively hooked my arm through my sister's and began to cart her home. "I'll call you when I'm not so pissed off that I want to punch your lights out," I spat over my shoulder. "And don't eat all my Twizzlers!"

"Thanks, Ellie," Angela said with a sniffle as we made our way into the house. "I didn't think you'd listen. I thought you hated me."

As soon as the front door shut I yanked my arm out of hers. "I didn't do that for *you*." I said, and then raised my voice to a shout. "And I *do* hate you! First you tried to make me like Seth when I didn't want to. Then you ruined my first kiss. Then you tried to get me to unlike the guy you made me like. Then you got me arrested. And now you're well on your way to breaking me up with my first boyfriend. Why can't you just *stay out of my life*!"

Big, fat tears began falling down Angela's face, but I didn't care. At least, I told myself I didn't care, but I knew that was a lie because it hurt when I stormed up to my room, and it was hard to ignore her when she called after me.

I guess Angela and I had had one too many fights lately, because my dad came in my room and literally dragged me downstairs by the arm. I could hear Angela in the office crying to my mom before I got there. "It doesn't matter. She's always hated me. Always!" she was saying.

"Oh, and like you haven't always hated me, too?" I said when my dad pushed me into the office. "You're embarrassed of me!"

"ENOUGH!" my dad exploded. "You two are going to stay in here until you learn to get along!"

Mom quickly scooted out of the office as Dad said, "Eleanor, if you lay one finger on your sister, I'm enrolling you in military school in the fall."

With that, he shut us in the office. It sounded like he pulled a chair over from the kitchen table and popped a squat in front of the door so we couldn't escape.

Brooding silently sounded like a much better plan than kissing and making up, so I plopped down in the desk chair and prepared to sit there all night. It was hard to stay as mad as I was, though, when Angela was crying hard enough to have snot running down her face. I grudgingly threw a box of Kleenex at her, but I still wasn't volunteering any apology. She could kiss my butt first.

As it turned out, listening to Angela cry was torture, and I wondered if that was part of my dad's plan. I was really relieved when she finally broke the silence, because I wasn't going to last much longer.

"That's not true, you know," she said, starting to get control of her sniffles. "I'm not embarrassed of you."

"Yeah," I scoffed. "Right. You've invited me to hang out with you and your friends so much all these years because you like having a freak little sister."

"Get over yourself Ellie. You're not some victim here. You're the one who hates me. You're the one who's embarrassed of *me*. You think I don't know what you say about me? How you and your stupid friends all make fun of the popular girly-girl airhead? I've tried to be nice to you lots of times. I stopped inviting you to do things because you would never come."

"Then why are you always trying to give me stupid makeovers? You always just want to take me shopping and do my hair and makeup and crap because I don't look like you and your friends."

"That's not true. I do that because those are just the things I like to do. I like to go shopping. I like to do hair. I thought it would be fun to clean you up. You're pretty, Ellie. You don't think you are, but you are. Excuse me for wanting my baby sister to understand that being a girl isn't a bad thing. There's more to life than just playing hockey with the J's, and you know I'm right. I know you've had some fun this summer. I know you've liked hanging out with me, too."

"If you like me so much, then why are you trying to ruin my life? You're perfect—pretty, smart, popular. Guys fall at your feet and worship you. Like, every guy. Even Dave. Even the J's drool over you."

"*Dave* likes me?"

Oh, geez! "Why do you have to take away the one guy who's ever liked *me*? The one guy in the world that doesn't call me by my last name, or tug my ponytail, or who wouldn't laugh if I wanted to put on a dress? Does it really bother you that much that Seth didn't pick you? Is that why you hate him so much?"

"Oh, shut up. You know that isn't true. As soon as I realized he liked

you, I was the one who tried to hook you up, remember? You know exactly why I don't want him near you."

I let go a semi-crazed laugh. "Angela, you can't really believe Seth is a serial killer! It's crazy! You know it's crazy. You said so yourself when I first mentioned it."

"Ellie, Travis is in the hospital."

That stopped me short. "What?"

"That's what I came to tell you. Dave called. Travis was attacked last night. It was a carjacking."

"A car…" I was in so much shock, I couldn't even finish my sentence.

Angela nodded. "He was going home from some party downtown last night and his car was stolen. Ellie, he was *stabbed*."

"Just like Seth."

"*Exactly* like Seth. And he was beat up so bad that he's still unconscious. Dave says everybody thinks Seth did it."

"What?" I gasped.

"Ellie, you were there at the park. You heard what he said."

"H-he-he—" I stammered. "He wouldn't."

"So this is what? *Another* coincidence? That the same thing that happened to Seth would happen to Travis just a couple days after Seth threatened to kill him? I know you don't want to believe it. I know you don't think he would hurt you but—"

"He wouldn't hurt me," I said fiercely. That much I knew.

Angela sighed. "Maybe you're right. Maybe he wouldn't hurt you. But would he hurt someone else if he thought he was protecting you?"

Yes. He's told me so several times.

Angela could read the answer on my face, but she didn't rub it in. "Is it such a stretch to think that if Seth could do that to Travis, that he could do it to someone else? Ellie, those girls…"

"He didn't do that!"

"How do you know?"

"Because I just know! He may have attacked Travis, but if he did, it was only because Travis hurt me. He was just protecting me."

"Should it make a difference? Travis is in the hospital."

All of the fight, all of my anger, my defiance, all of it left me, and I slumped into my chair as far as I could go. How could he do it? How could he hurt someone like that? *Because he cares about me.*

"*I* care about you, Ellie."

I looked up at my sister in shock. Not because I'd somehow said my thoughts out loud again, but because of what she'd said in response.

Angela's eyes welled up again and she reached for another tissue. "You're right," she whispered. "Maybe I have been a little embarrassed of you. We've both been pretty nasty to each other over

the years. I know you think I'm awful, and I can't blame you for hating me, but I don't hate you. I've liked getting to know you a little this summer. I've liked having a sister I can talk to and hang out with. I'm really sorry about getting you arrested, and more sorry about your first kiss. But you have to trust me. I'm not trying to break you up with Seth because I'm jealous. I'm scared, Ellie." She shrugged awkwardly and blew her nose. "I sort of just found you. I don't want to lose you."

My eyes burned and my chest felt like it was caving in on itself. I was so shocked, and more overwhelmed than I think I'd ever been in my life. "I'm sorry, too," I managed to choke out. "I've spent my whole life having to hear everyone say over and over how perfect you are. Even our own mom. I've always hated you for that. I guess you're not the one who's been jealous."

"You shouldn't be jealous of me. Guys like me because I'm pretty, but they like you because you're cool."

When I looked up at Angela, she shook her head. "I never noticed it until that night at Rachel's lake house. I always just thought you were a geek who only hung out with the J's, but you had just as many friends at that party as I did, and the people that didn't know you spent the night asking me about you."

"I think that was just your bikini."

Angela laughed at that, but shook her head again. "You're fun, and tough, and confident. It took me a whole thirty seconds to convince Dave that you'd be an awesome girlfriend. So you guys didn't have it. But now that he's put the idea into people's heads that you're a dating possibility, they're probably all calling dibbs over who gets to take a shot next. Trust me, they can't all be like Dave. Somebody's bound to make you swoon."

Angela started to laugh, until she saw the look on my face. Somebody already had made me swoon. It just turned out that he was a jealous, overprotective, emotionally disturbed psycho. "Ang," I whispered. "What am I gonna do?"

"I don't know," she whispered back. "But don't worry. We'll figure something out."

And that's when the unthinkable happened. Something that I don't think has ever happened in the history of man except through excessive force. Angela and I *hugged* each other. "I'm sorry I didn't listen to you," I said with a squeeze.

She hugged me back just as tight and said, "No, I'm sorry. I should have trusted you when you told me he was weird in the first place. It's my fault you fell for him."

Of course that had to be the moment when my dad decided to check on us.

“All right, girls. How come I don’t hear…?” His voice trailed off and I looked over just in time to see the gum fall out of his mouth. “Karen!” he shouted, gaping at us. “Karen, hurry!”

My mom probably thought I’d killed Angela the way she came running. When she burst into the office and saw my sister and me with our arms around each other—and not because we were choking one another—her knees just about gave out. “Who are they and what have they done with our children?”

“I don’t know, but I think Hell must have frozen over.”

“Are you sure it’s real?”

“Did you put something in their dinner tonight?”

Dorks.

“Dorks.”

I was startled when my thought echoed me. This whole saying my thoughts out loud thing was starting to get out of hand. But it turned out that Angela and I just think alike. It was her who’d called them dorks.

My parents finally started laughing at themselves and congratulating each other on their excellent parenting skills, earning eye rolls and groans from both Angela and me. “Can we come out now?” Angela asked.

“I don’t know,” my mom said. “I’m thinking we should leave you in there forever.”

With another groan Angela looped her arm through mine and tugged me past them. “We’ll be in Ellie’s room.”

For the second Sunday in a row Michigan's parks were free of any dead redheads, and it's because Seth spent the night in jail. At least, that's what Angela told me when she woke me up bright and early at eight that morning.

Last night, after we'd escaped our parents, we were up in my room trying to decide whether we should tell them about Seth attacking Travis, when two cop cars showed up at Seth's house. We watched from my window as the cops took Seth away in handcuffs. His Aunt hugged him tightly before they put him in the back of the car. When the cops drove away, Ms. Wainwright followed in the Beemer. The car had not come back yet.

"But he told me yesterday that murderers would never go after people they know. Travis, he knows. And has reason to hate. If Seth were a killer, he wouldn't be that stupid. He may have attacked Travis, but he isn't the Slasher."

"Who else could it be?" Angela said. "Last weekend Seth spent the night here with you and there was no murder. Last night he was taken to jail and once again, there was no murder."

I had to admit, it looked bad.

"Ellie, we have to tell mom and dad. We have to call that detective."

"No!" My heart was racing. Watching Seth get carted off last night was awful. I sat all night in my window, waiting for his aunt to bring him home. I couldn't stand the thought of him being in jail. I knew he could take care of himself against the other criminals, but there was a part of him that was so vulnerable.

I just wanted him home where I knew he was safe. I needed to tell him I was sorry for getting mad yesterday and let him know I appreciated that he wanted to protect me, even if he did take it too far.

"He was only protecting me," I said, frustrated. "That's the only reason he went after Travis. I'm not going to blame him for the Saturday Night murders unless we have proof. Actual physical proof."

I glanced at the house across the street, sitting there so empty and tempting, and sighed. "I have to know for sure."

Angela watched me slip on my shoes. She followed me all the way across the street before asking, “What are you doing?”

“What are *we* doing?” I corrected her. “It’s a little thing called breaking and entering.”

“What? We can’t!”

“Why? It’s not like Seth’s never broken into my room. I have to at least try to figure it out. If he has any kind of proof over there, then I’ll accept that my boyfriend is a psycho killer and we’ll call that detective. I promise.”

“But you can’t just go breaking into people’s houses, Ellie. You could end up in jail, too.”

“I need closure,” I admitted desperately. “I still like him, okay? Angela, I like him a lot. If he killed those girls, then I need proof. I have to see it with my own eyes. I need something that’s going to make me stop liking him.”

A sinking feeling crept into my stomach just then. I stopped everything I was doing and looked into Angela’s eyes. “And if I do find proof that he killed those girls,” I whispered, pushing back nausea, “then I’m really going to need my big sister there to keep me from completely freaking out.”

Angela stared back at me, swallowing horrible thoughts of her own, and grabbed my hand. “Okay,” she said, sounding resolved. “Okay, lets do it.”

“Thanks.”

As it turned out, my first criminal act was surprisingly easy to accomplish, because Ms. Wainwright had left in such a hurry last night that she’d forgotten to lock the front door. “I wonder if we’ll get half the time, since we’re only entering and not actually breaking,” Angela said when we shut and locked the door behind us.

“Lets just hurry so that we don’t get caught, and then we won’t get any time.”

“So what are we looking for? Where do you think we should start looking?”

“His room,” I said automatically. “There’s a metal box under his bed I’ve been dying to look in. I saw it once when he had me pinned to his floor.”

I started to head up the stairs, but Angela was just standing in the middle of the room gaping at me. “Ellie,” she said slowly, her cheeks turning a light shade of pink. “I know the whole dating thing is really exciting, but I don’t know if you should be moving that fast. I mean, you only got your first kiss a couple weeks ago.”

“What do you think I was doing?” I gasped when I finally caught Angela’s meaning. “He’d kidnapped me and trapped me in his room. After I smashed his lamp in a million pieces and bruised his head with

his alarm clock, he had to pin me to the floor to keep me from throwing anything else. We weren't *doing* anything."

"Oh. Good." Angela followed me upstairs. "Because that would be really awkward if you guys did do something and he ends up in jail for life. You'd have to go on an episode of *Dr. Phil* to get normal again."

"I need to go on *Dr. Phil* just because I live with you," I argued as we walked into Seth's bedroom. He'd cleaned up the sodas and Twizzlers from our game night and had my beanbag tucked neatly in the corner with his game chair.

"Kind of creepy in here, don't you think?" Angela asked.

I looked around. "Looks like a normal room to me. Just really, really clean."

"What do you think I mean by creepy?"

"Whatever. Just start looking for anything weird."

I reached under his bed and pulled out the metal box. It was a small red toolbox and, unfortunately, it was locked. "Quick, there has to be a key somewhere. Look around for a tiny key. Check his dresser drawers or something."

"I'm not looking through his underwear. He's your boyfriend. You check the dresser."

I rolled my eyes and started rummaging through his drawers. Two seconds later, I felt Angela hovering behind me. "Huh," she said. "Boxer-briefs. Interesting. Wouldn't have guessed that."

"I thought you didn't want to go through his underwear."

"I'm not. You are."

"There's nothing here," I said, closing the last drawer.

Angela picked up a bottle of cologne while I went to the nightstand. "This looks expensive," she said, squirting some on her wrist.

"Could you at least try to be helpful?"

"Wow, this smells good. Does he always smell this good?"

Unfortunately. "Nothing in the nightstand but his taser," I said. I couldn't help picking it up and pushing the button. Blue sparks sizzled. "I wonder how bad this thing hurts."

"I dare you to try it."

I held the taser out to Angela and pushed the button again. "Try it on you?"

"Funny. Put that thing down and lets see what he's got in his closet." Angela slid open the closet door and began looking at the hanging clothes. "Ooh, it's too bad it hasn't been cold out. I bet Seth looks gorgeous in this," she said, pulling a dark brown suede jacket off its hanger.

When she tried it on I asked, "Are you even looking for evidence, or just snooping?"

"I wonder how much money he dropped on this wardrobe. I wish I had—wait." Angela gasped. "What is *this*?"

There was something taped to the back of the closet. I shoved all the clothes aside and Angela let out a quiet shriek. "What is it? Some kind of shrine?"

"Don't be stupid, idiot. Shrines need like candles and stuff."

"What's he doing with pictures of dead girls taped in his closet?" Angela asked.

"I'm more concerned about the girls up there who aren't dead," I whispered.

Until that moment I never actually believed Seth had anything to do with the Saturday Night Slasher. But we were looking at a collage of pictures, police reports, and post-it notes, all from the Slasher case. Heather Monroe, Olivia Harvey, Crystal Chambers, and the first victim, who's name turned out to be Monica Stanley—they were all there, staring me right in the face with the pictures of three other girls who all fit the same profile.

"It's not a shrine," I whispered. "It's research. He's studying the case. Look how he has it all organized. It's like he's trying to solve it."

"Are you kidding?" Angela asked, pointing at the picture of a girl named Jennifer McConnelly. "That is *not* solving it. *That* is a picture of his next victim."

I tried not to believe her. "What about all this information, then? All the police reports. All the profiles of the people working on the case. Why would he have that?"

"He needs to know how close the cops are to catching him, obviously. You asked for proof. This is your proof. Give me my phone. I'm calling Detective Pierce."

"No! It's not enough. It can't be him."

Yeah, I was in complete denial. So what?

"Ellie, you promised. What more do you need? For him to come after you with a knife?"

"Pictures!" I gasped.

Angela was starting to get frustrated. "What do you think these are?" she yelled.

"No. I mean polaroids. The killer left polaroids of the victims behind, right? So they'd connect the murders? Well, don't all killers like to take souvenirs? He's taking pictures of them. If Seth is the killer, then he'll have those pictures."

"Hey, good thinking."

"I've already checked the dresser and nightstand." I looked around the perfectly tidy room and went back to Seth's bed. "Help me lift his mattress."

"Careful Ellie, do you really want to know what he keeps tucked

between his mattresses?"

"Oh, shut up and lift."

"Ellie, if he is really killing people, do you think he'd be dumb enough to keep the evidence between his mattresses? You have to get more creative than that."

"And where do you suggest I look?" I snapped as I pushed my arm under his mattress. "The only place you seem to be looking is over my shoulder. Would you please help me?"

Angela sighed as if I were asking her to take my finals for me. "All right, fine." With a look that suggested I was an idiot, Angela reached beneath the bed and pulled the toolbox into her lap. After examining the small lock she said, "It's not much more than something you'd find on a suitcase. I'm sure we can pick it. Do you have a Bobbi pin?" She and I both snorted at the same time. "Sorry. I forgot who I was talking to."

"Will this work?" I asked, handing her my keys with the pink Swiss Army knife keychain.

"Aw, this is so cute," she cooed. "Where did you get this?"

"Seth gave it to me for my birthday."

"Huh, that's actually really sweet. Too bad we're going to use his present to put him in jail."

After a minute of fiddling with the lock, it clicked open. Angela started to lift the lid and my heart skipped a beat. "Wait," I whispered.

Angela looked up at me. "Did you want to do it?"

"No! I—I—I can't look. I don't want to know what's in there."

"We have to look."

"But what if it is him? I can't handle it. You look. You look and then don't tell me. If it's him, I don't want to know."

"Ellie." Angela's voice turned sympathetic. "It'll be okay. If it is him, then we've stopped a murderer from killing innocent girls. You'll be safe again." She smiled playfully. "I'll be ungrounded on the weekends again."

That made me smile. "Ah, the real reason you're helping me."

We both managed a short laugh and then Angel took a deep breath. "Here goes."

I pinched my eyes shut and held my breath.

"Oh," Angela whispered in awe. "Wow."

"What!" My eyes flew open and Angela handed me the toolbox.

Inside the box was what was left of Seth's parents. A handful of photographs, a matching set of wedding bands, a pair of eyeglasses, a lock of his mom's hair—almost an exact match in color to mine.

"She was beautiful," Angela said, staring at a picture of Seth's mom.

I picked up a family picture and looked closely at Seth's father. "So was he," I said. Neither of us could raise our voices above a whisper.

“It’s no wonder Seth is so…”

“Yummy?” Angela offered.

Seth was a nice mix of the two of them. He had his father’s eyes and his mother’s nose and smile. In the picture they were on a beach and a nine-year-old Seth was proudly showing off a sand castle like he didn’t have a care in the world. He had on a smile I’d never seen him wear. The picture hinted at just how much his parent’s deaths had changed him. My heart just about broke in half seeing them together.

When the front door slammed shut downstairs, I jumped so high the contents of the toolbox scattered.

“They’re home!” Angela hissed.

I frantically shoved everything back in the toolbox, while Angela took off Seth’s Jacket and fixed the clothes in his closet to cover up the wall.

“We can’t get out the window,” I told Angela. “We’re going to have to wait until Ms. Wainwright goes to her room or something, and then sneak out.”

“What about Seth?”

“He’s probably still in jail.”

Just then we heard Seth’s aunt say, “You want me to make you a sandwich or anything?”

“No, thanks,” Seth replied—geez he sounded depressed. “I’m just tired.”

“Alright. Then I’m going to make some calls in my office for a while. We’ll get this sorted out.”

“Yeah, sure.” Seth didn’t sound as optimistic as his aunt.

We heard the sound of the office door shut and then there were feet heavy on the stairs. Angela and I looked at each other in horror. Seth’s bedroom door was hanging wide open and in like two seconds he was going to walk in and find us snooping through his stuff. We were dead.

“Quick, Angela, hide behind the door. I’ll distract him and you slip out.”

“Ellie, no!” Angela grabbed the taser from the nightstand. “I have a better idea.”

“We are not tasing him! He won’t hurt me, Angela,” I hissed as I shoved her behind his door and made sure she was out of site. Then I dashed over to his bed and hugged his pillow like I’d been sleeping for a while. I’m not even sure my eyes were all the way closed when he walked in his room.

“Ellie?” he gasped.

I did my best impression of someone being stirred from a deep sleep. After a moment, I took one look at his destroyed face and didn’t have to act when I rushed to him and threw my arms around him.

“Seth! I’m so glad you’re back. I was so worried.”

The way his arms came around me was more reactive than anything. “What are you doing here?” he asked, shocked and completely confused.

I pulled my chin back to look up into his eyes, but I refused to loosen my grip around his waist. “I know about Travis,” I said. “That’s what Angela came to tell me about.”

“Ellie, wait, I swear I—”

“It doesn’t matter,” I told him quickly. I didn’t want to hear his excuses. I didn’t want to even think about what he’d done. If I could just ignore that and focus on his face—his beautiful pain-stricken face—I could forget anything was wrong and just be glad to see him long enough to get Angela to safety.

“When I saw the cops out front of your house last night I thought I was going to be sick. They took you away in handcuffs, and after hearing about Travis I was sure they were taking you to jail. I thought I wouldn’t see you again, and I’d left so mad yesterday. I thought you were going to spend your life in prison thinking I hated you.”

I squeezed Seth even tighter and my name escaped his mouth in the form of a sigh. He hugged me back as if my very presence was renewing his strength.

“How come they let you go?” I couldn’t help asking.

“They only brought me in for questioning.” Seth’s body tensed beneath me. “I don’t know why they bothered. They didn’t believe a word I said. The only reason they didn’t arrest me was because they didn’t have any proof. Travis’s car is still missing, and he didn’t get a good enough look at his attacker. The guy wore a mask and came at him from behind when he was getting in his car.”

I shuddered, wondering how Seth could talk so nonchalantly about a guy he’d nearly killed. Seth felt me shake and squeezed me so tight it almost hurt. I scrambled for something to say. “I hope you don’t mind that I came over, but I was just so worried sick about you.”

“Mind that you came over?” Seth repeated incredulously. The confusion may have been gone from his voice, but the disbelief sure wasn’t. “I was afraid you’d hate me. I didn’t think you’d ever let me explain.”

Hearing Seth’s door creak, I glanced over his shoulder. My sister was still waiting for a chance to make a break for it. I felt Seth start to turn and brought my hand to his hair, slowly raking my fingers through it. Seth’s eyes fell shut at the caress.

“I don’t need an explanation,” I told him. “I just need my boyfriend to kiss me.”

Seth was baffled, but successfully distracted. Angela could have driven a tank out of his room and he wouldn’t have noticed. “You just

said the B word," he said.

"And yet you're still not kissing me."

Seth didn't have to be told again. He kissed me so earnestly that even though I knew he had a closet full of dead and possibly soon-to-be-dead girls' pictures, I melted in his arms. On the bright side, Angela was able to escape safely. On the not so bright side, I was now kissing someone who probably stabbed a guy and possibly killed four girls, and I was finding that I didn't really want to stop.

Thank goodness for Lady GaGa. If there's one thing that can kill my mood to make out, it's pop music. "Don't answer it," Seth growled—apparently, it didn't kill his mood. But I knew it would be Angela attempting to rescue me, so I answered it.

"Hello?"

"Ellie, hey, are you still at Seth's?"

Seth heard Angela's voice come through the receiver and *that* did kill his mood. He let go of me and fell to his bed, scowling. I laid down on the bed with him, even though that made me want to kiss him some more. I needed to be close enough to him that he would still hear whatever excuse Angela was about to give me.

"Don't worry, we're not fighting anymore," I explained to Seth, smiling when he rolled against me and draped his arm over my stomach. In the phone I said, "Yeah, I'm still here. Seth got home like five minutes ago, so I was thinking I'd stay for a while. Why, what's up?"

"You'd better get home. I just heard Dad wake up."

I shot straight up. There was a good chance this excuse was real. "Thanks. I'm coming right now."

Seth clung to my hand and gave me an inquisitive look. "Sorry," I said. "But I do not want to have to explain to my father what I'm doing at your house at eight in the morning in my PJ's."

Seth looked unhappy about having to let go of me, but at least he didn't look pissed off. "Are we ever going to get the chance to make out with no interruptions?"

"Not right now," I said. "I'll call you later. I'm glad you're home."

Seth walked me to the front door and wouldn't let me go until I kissed him. "You owe me a make-out session," he warned me. I just responded with a smile.

Angela practically tackled me the minute I walked in the door. "I cannot believe we got away with that!" she said once she'd slammed my bedroom door shut. Both of us headed straight for my window. "When that front door opened I thought we were goners. Nice distraction, by the way. Way to make out with a murderer."

My natural instincts wanted to spit out some stupid comeback, but the only thing that came out of my mouth was a sigh.

"You have to accept it, Ellie. We have to call the cops."

"But we didn't find anything that proves he did it. It could still not be him."

"But what about those pictures in his closet? There were three girls there that aren't dead yet. Do we have to wait until they are?"

I was defeated and I knew it. "I guess not."

Three hours later I still wasn't convinced talking to the cops was the right thing, but Angela and I were sitting in the food court of the mall with the detective we'd talked to before. "I could have come to your house," Detective Pierce said once he'd ordered a coffee and joined us at our table. "I really should be talking to you with your parents."

"No!" Angela and I said together. I think it startled Detective Pierce.

"Our parents are leaving to go on a cruise this Wednesday," Angela explained. "If they knew about all this they would cancel their trip."

"It's their twentieth anniversary," I added. "And they've never been on a vacation without us before. It would break their hearts if they didn't get to go."

"You mean to tell me that you girls will be home alone this weekend?"

"I'm almost eighteen," Angela said, taking offense. "We're old enough to be home alone. Plus, we have an emergency contact list five miles long. We'll be fine."

"And there's really no reason to worry, right?" I asked. "I mean, you said last time that all this stuff with Seth is probably just coincidence. Right?"

The detective tugged at his collar, obviously very uncomfortable about something.

"What?" I demanded, while Angela more politely asked, "Did you find something?"

The cop looked around the crowded mall and leaned over the table to whisper to us. "We found your friend Travis's stolen car. There was a knife inside."

"What's that got to do with Seth?" I asked.

"Or the Saturday Night Slasher?" Angela added.

"The knife was covered in blood, so we ran DNA tests. We found Travis's DNA, as well as the DNA of two of the Saturday Night victims. Whoever attacked Travis is definitely our serial killer."

"Well, that doesn't make sense," I argued. "The Saturday Night Slasher has been flawless. He hasn't left one single fingerprint or strand of hair or anything through four murders. Why would he suddenly attack some random kid, steal a car and then be so careless to leave the murder weapon behind. That's just stupid."

Detective Pierce patronized me with a smile. "Crimes of passion are

always more careless. Your boyfriend was really upset about Travis getting physical with you."

"But you can't prove it was Seth who attacked him!"

The cop's smile turned rueful. "It's true. There's no proof that it was Seth who attacked Travis," he said. I don't think he was trying to console me. "Everything, even what you've told me about the pictures in his room, is all circumstantial. We can't nail this kid until we have hard proof."

I flinched at the way he'd said *nail this kid*. This cop was convinced, and he was out for blood. And if he was that convinced, and he was the lead detective on the Saturday Night Slasher case…

My world came crumbling down around me. "So it's true then," I mumbled. "Seth really is the…" I couldn't finish my sentence. My boyfriend was a serial killer. I kissed a serial killer. I liked a serial killer. *Still* liked him.

I felt Angela's arm go around my shoulder, but it didn't make me feel any better. "What am I supposed to do now?" I whispered.

"Uh, break up?" Angela suggested.

"No!" Detective Pierce said so suddenly that Angela and I both jumped.

"What?" Angela gasped.

"I can't just stay in a relationship with a murderer."

"Eleanor," the cop said gently. "You have to act normal. No sudden break-ups. If Seth thinks you've figured out his secret, if he suspects you're going to turn on him at all, he'll kill you to protect himself. It's what these guys do. You have to play along until I can catch him. It's the only way to keep you safe."

"But Seth won't come after me. No matter how much he probably wants to, he can't. It's too risky and he knows it. He said as much when I told him Angela thought he was the Slasher."

"You told him that?" Angela gasped.

"I had to tell him something," I snapped defensively. "He was more than a little butt-hurt about you calling the cops on him."

That made Mr. Detective man flinch. "You told him that you guys called me?" he asked carefully.

"Do I look like I'm stupid?" I said. "Of course I didn't tell my boyfriend that my crazy sister called the police and accused him of murdering four girls. I wanted to keep him as a boyfriend at the time. No. Angela told him she called the cops on him in the park after he pulled a knife on Travis. He didn't understand why she would rat him out so easily when no one actually got hurt and he was only defending me."

"So he doesn't know that you've been contacting the police about this? He just thinks it's a crazy theory?"

"Yes."

"And does he think you believe it?"

"Of course not."

Detective Pierce sharpened his gaze on both of us and slowly asked, "Have either of you told anyone anything about any of this? Your parents? Friends?"

Angela shook her head and I said, "Just when I told Seth Angela's crazy theory. But I didn't tell him how much she believes it."

Detective Pierce let out a breath. "Good," he said. "This has to stay just between us. If Seth suspects anything at all, he'll come after you. I'm doing my best to get him behind bars, but I need just a little more time."

I raised my hand as if waiting for the teacher to call on me. "So, I'm still confused. How exactly am I supposed to act like a normal girlfriend to a *murderer*?"

Detective Pierce laughed. Highly unprofessional, if you ask me. Stupid authority figures thinking they are so superior all the time. Of course, I have anger management issues. "From the sounds of it, you are already anything but a normal girlfriend, so just be yourself."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I snapped.

I had no idea why my question made the detective smile, or Angela snort. Judging from the looks they were giving me, I was waiting for them both to sigh and go, "Oh, Ellie." They had to spell it out for me before I got it.

"It seems that you keep young Mr. Bishop on his toes in the romance department," Detective Pierce said.

"Huh?"

"You make him insanely jealous because all your friends are guys, you don't put up with his crap, and I'm guessing you probably don't put out enough for his liking either," Angela translated. "I think Detective Pierce is saying you're unpredictable in a relationship."

Detective Pierce nodded and said, "Which will work to your advantage. We'll get him as quickly as we can, and I'll keep an eye on you, but just remember the most important thing to keeping yourself safe right now is never let him know you suspect him." He glanced at Angela next to me and added, "You, either."

I looked at my sister with a frown. All she'd ever done is suspect him. "We are so dead."

“This sucks.”

I was eating Ben and Jerry’s straight from the carton on my front porch Wednesday morning with Angela, instead of playing hockey in the park where I should have been. This was the second game I’d missed.

Ever since my psycho boyfriend knifed down some jerk that tried to feel me up, everyone I knew was avoiding me like I had the plague. They hadn’t actually said not to show up, but it was pretty clear that they were afraid to even look at me for fear that Seth would come after them next.

I watched my boyfriend viciously attack the punching bag in his garage. “My life is over.”

“That’s a little dramatic, don’t you think?” Angela asked.

“Um, no. Thanks to Seth, everyone I know is terrified to come near me. I’ll never play hockey again. I’ll never have friends again. The only people who still even talk to me are either related to me or kill people on the weekends for fun.”

“Look at the bright side. You only have two more years until you can find a nice out-of-state college where nobody knows you. Assuming your boyfriend doesn’t kill you first.”

“Thank you so much for that, Angela.”

As if he knew we were talking about him, Seth looked our direction and waved tentatively to us. He took a minute to gulp down some water and wipe the sweat from the back of his neck.

“And speaking of our serial hottie,” Angela said as we both plastered fake smiles on our faces and waved back. “Is it wrong that I still wouldn’t miss watching his workouts for anything, even knowing he uses those muscles for overpowering helpless girls?”

I didn’t want to miss them, either. That was part of my problem. I sighed again and Angela echoed it. “How are things in fake relationship land?” she asked upon the return of my depression.

“Awful,” I said. “I think I would fail miserably as an actor. I can’t ever relax around him. I haven’t let him kiss me since we talked to Detective Pierce. He knows I’m scared of him. He knows I’m upset. I don’t think I’m keeping him happy at all.”

“But do you think he knows we’re talking to the cops?”

I shook my head. “He thinks I’m scared of him because of Travis. He keeps telling me that he didn’t attack Travis. He thinks I don’t believe him.”

“You don’t,” Angela pointed out.

“I know. But he’s not supposed to know that. He also knows I’ve been upset about my friends and thinks I blame him for not being able to play hockey anymore.”

“You do.”

“I know. The worst part is, he’s been extra sweet because he’s trying to make everything okay again. If he weren’t a serial killer, he’d be the perfect boyfriend.”

It seemed I couldn’t do anything but sigh anymore. And gorge myself on ice cream. “I don’t know how long I can do this, Angela.”

“Well, hopefully you won’t have to much longer. I mean, there’s a good chance he’ll try to kill someone this Saturday, right? Then Detective Pierce will get him and it will all be over and things can go back to normal.”

My stomach churned when Angela said the word normal. I scooted my ice cream far away from me. “Normal?” I scoffed. “Nothing about my life is normal anymore. It hasn’t been all summer.”

“Holy pink shirt Batman!” a voice called out from the curb in front of my house.

When I looked up and saw the J’s walking up my front lawn I let out a shriek and jumped to my feet. Josh happened to be the closest, so he was the one I tackled. I was so relieved to see them—and so desperate for something in my life to make sense again—that I didn’t care how girly it was.

I ran full force and literally leapt at Josh, wrapping him in the tightest hug I had in me. Josh was forced to catch me, but try as he might to stay on his feet, my attack had come as such a surprise that we tumbled over. “What the hell, Westley?” he screeched when we came to a stop in the grass—me laying on top of him. “Get off me, you psycho!”

I rolled off him and Jack helped me to my feet. I was still so blissfully happy to see them that the minute I had my balance I wrapped my arms around an unsuspecting Jack and squeezed like I was never going to let go.

“Um, Westley?” Jack asked as if I’d completely lost my marbles.

“Sorry. I’m just so glad you’re back,” I said, but couldn’t make myself let go.

“Geez, Westley,” Josh murmured behind me. “They said you went crazy, but…”

That’s when Jack started fidgeting beneath my embrace. “Guys?” he

squeaked. “Little help?”

I finally pulled back. When I met Jack’s eyes his face went all pink, which then made my face go all pink and I quickly looked away. But looking away didn’t help, because I found myself staring at Jesse. He watched me for a second, but then broke into a grin and held open his arms. “Well, come on then. I’m not scared of you.”

I don’t know why, but his acceptance of the new me is what made me lose it all together. I fell into his arms and actually got misty-eyed. “Thanks, Jesse,” I whispered, praying that none of them would hear the emotion in my voice.

Jesse squeezed me so tight that I started to believe maybe my life wasn’t going to come to an end. Maybe I could still be the new Ellie and it would be okay.

Of course, Jesse had to go and ruin the moment by saying, “Dude, you really do have a nice rack. That’s crazy! All this time I never knew.”

I finally realized why he was hugging me so hard. I ripped my chest away from his and punched him hard in the stomach. “Perve on me again and I’ll make sure you never have children!”

As soon as Jesse could breathe again he started laughing. “Good news, guys. She may be hot now, but she’s still the same old Westley.”

“Shut up, dillweed.”

Josh threw his arm over my shoulder and said, “If it helps, I still don’t think you’re hot.”

We all finally burst into laughter and just about the time somebody yanked on my ponytail, a door slammed rather loudly across the street, bringing me back to reality. The guys all questioned my sigh, but I just muttered, “I’ll be back,” and headed across the street without further explanation.

I pounded on the front door and when he didn’t answer I yelled, “They’re my best friends! I’ve known them my whole life. What do you want from me?”

The door between us swung open and Seth glared at me, too enraged to speak. When I opened my mouth to start yelling, he yanked me against him and smashed his lips on mine. At first his kiss tasted of anger, but it quickly melted into something so sincere that my muscles relaxed.

His hands came around my waist, holding me up when I threatened to collapse. His breathing was ragged and his eyes burned wildly as he stared into my face more fierce than I’d ever seen him. “I know things aren’t good between us right now, but I can’t lose you, Ellie,” he said. “I *can’t*.”

He shot a worried glance over my shoulder and I remembered the J’s. I whirled around, my face burning, and sure enough, they were

standing there gaping. Jesse looked shocked, Josh looked slightly disgusted, and poor Jack looked really confused.

I dragged Seth over to the J's and shrugged awkwardly. "Seth, these are the J's. Guys? Seth. My, um, my…"

"Boyfriend," Seth grumbled, annoyed when I didn't say the word.

"So we noticed," Jesse said.

"You're not gonna start doing that in front of us all the time now, are you?" Jack asked.

Josh nodded vigorously and added, "I just threw up in my mouth a little."

"Yeah," Jesse chimed in. "You never see me sticking my tongue in anyone's mouth."

I shuddered. That was something I hoped I never saw.

"Only 'cause no chick would let you, Jesse," Jack said.

Jesse smirked. "Your mom doesn't have a problem when I do it to her."

Jesse got punched again and as he and Jack fell to the ground in a wrestling match I gave Seth a dry look. "Do you see now why the J's are not an issue?"

"Then what is the issue?" Seth asked.

"There's no issue," I said quickly. "Everything's fine."

Josh, who was now trying to hit on Angela, said to Seth, "Don't let her snow you, dude. Westley's a big, fat liar."

"Do you mind?" I snapped.

Josh flashed me a big grin. "Not at all. Actually, this whole Westley-has-a-boyfriend thing has potential."

I was about to give Josh the finger, but Seth grabbed my hand. "Can we talk?"

"We are talking."

Seth's face flushed with anger. "Alone?"

"Um."

"Ellie, you can't keep avoiding me!"

Apparently one rumor that hadn't reached the J's yet was the news of Seth stabbing Travis, otherwise they might have thought twice before starting in with the crap.

"Ooh, lovers spat!"

"Trouble in paradise already, Westley?"

"Better watch it, dude. Westley's not so good at carrying on a conversation without punching people."

"This ought to be good. Ten bucks says Westley lays him out in less than two minutes."

I could see Seth's temper nearing its boiling point. "Please? Before I kill one—or possibly all—of your best friends?" he asked, trying not to growl.

I glanced nervously at Angela and she mouthed, “Keep him happy.”

I looked down at Seth’s white knuckles and swallowed back my nerves. “Yeah, okay, fine,” I said, and Seth practically raced me inside his house.

“Better make it a quickie, Westley!” Josh hollered loud enough for the entire neighborhood to hear. “We still have to show you all our sick new skills.”

“Looking forward to it! It will be that much more pathetic now when I cream you!” I yelled and shut Seth’s front door. I leaned against it and let out a breath. “Idiots. Why did I want them to come home so bad?”

“That is going to get old really fast,” Seth said, glaring at the door.

The loathing Seth displayed for my best friends was overwhelming. I guess it’s a good thing he wasn’t going to have to put up with them much longer. I pitied his cellmate.

“They don’t mean it,” I said. “If they’re razzing us, that’s a good thing. They’re not completely freaked out. And right now they’re the only people still talking to me, so you should be nicer.”

Seth’s face crumbled when I glared at him. “Ellie, I didn’t touch Travis. I know how it looks, but you have to believe me.”

“I do believe you.”

“No, you don’t! You’re scared of me again. You’ve been on edge with me for days, and I don’t understand, because when I came home from the police station you said you didn’t care. You waited here all night for me to come home and were happy to see me. Everything was great, and then later that day something happened. What are you not telling me?”

Seth’s gaze was accusing and it made my stomach flip. He was aware of a lot more than I realized. “What do you mean?” I asked slowly, trying to stay calm.

Seth was not calm. “I was at the mall on Sunday!” he yelled, grabbing fistfuls of his hair and yanking them in frustration. “I saw you and Angela talking to that cop!”

I blanched, and then I backed away from him, slamming my back into the front door.

Seth quickly reigned in his temper. “Who was he? What did he say to you that’s made you afraid of me?”

I was freaked out. What was I going to do? I had to come up with something and quick, but I was too scared to come up with a decent lie. If I couldn’t fix this right now, Seth would know we knew about him, and Angela and I would both be dead. “Were you following us?” I demanded, trying to stall.

Seth let go a frustrated breath and stalked upstairs. I thought about leaving, but my curiosity got the better of me, so I followed him.

“What are you doing?” I asked when he pulled the toolbox from beneath his bed.

He didn’t answer me. He set the box on his dresser, popped the lid with his knife, and pulled a small box from it that hadn’t been in there when Angela and I went through it. “I wasn’t *spying* on you,” he grumbled, shoving the box into my hands. “I was there buying you this.”

I was scared to look, but too curious not to. My jaw hit the floor when I opened the case and found a necklace inside. A necklace with a freaking diamond hanging off it. “Holy crap, is that *real*?”

“Ellie, the other night was a *bad* night. When I came home and found you waiting for me…” Seth’s voice was suddenly clouded with emotion. “No one’s ever been there for me like that. Ever. I wanted to get you something special, so you’d know how much you mean to me. Something only a boyfriend would give you.”

I suck. I had to swallow back bile. Oh, the guilt. *I’m a jerk! I’m scum!* Here he thinks I was being this super supportive girlfriend, when really I was looking for evidence to get him thrown in prison for the rest of his life. *But he’s murdering people, Ellie*.

“I saw you and your sister talking to that cop and figured it wasn’t a good idea to interrupt you. I assumed he was asking you about Travis. But I also thought you’d come home and tell me about it. Only, you didn’t. You came home acting like you thought I killed someone.”

He knows! Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap! I started looking for an escape route. Seth grabbed me by the shoulders and said, “What did he say to you?”

“Nothing!” I gasped. “I-I-he…” I panicked and blurted, “It wasn’t about Travis. It was about the Saturday Night Slasher.”

Seth froze and I realized my mistake. If Seth didn’t know we were on to him before, he sure did now. I searched frantically for a lie. “That guy is a detective in the Slasher case. He just wanted to talk to me because I fit the profile. He said he’s been visiting all the girls he could find that could be at risk and telling us how to stay safe.”

I thought my story sounded reasonable enough, but I don’t think Seth bought it, because he got pissed. Scary pissed. It’s like he just shut off all his emotions and turned to stone in order to gain complete control of himself. It was the type of eerie focus I could only imagine he had when he was slicing up screaming girls.

“How did he find you?” he asked, his voice like steel. “Cops don’t just have a database of all the teenage redheads in the world.”

Oh, no. He didn’t just know the cops were on to him. He knew we turned him in. “Um...” I hated how much my voice was shaking. I didn’t like him knowing I was scared. “He didn’t say. But I did get hauled down to the big house last weekend. They didn’t take my

fingerprints or anything like they did you, but I'm sure there's a report somewhere with my name in it. Plus several cops there that day mentioned I was serial killer bait. Any of them could have said something."

That seemed to do the trick. Seth stood there, lost in thought for a minute, but he eventually snapped out of it and switched back over to calm, loving boyfriend. He pulled me against him and murmured into my hair in a silky voice. "That's what's had you so upset this week? Why didn't you just tell me?"

"I don't know. I guess I was embarrassed. I feel like a paranoid mental case."

Seth kissed my head and rubbed my back, trying to sooth away my nerves while he held me. His touch was so tender, his smile so sincere. And the way he got lost in my eyes? It was too much to resist. When he told me not to worry and promised me I was safe, it was hard not to believe him.

He felt it the instant I relaxed. He looked at me with these big hopeful eyes and asked, "So you weren't just afraid of me? You really do believe me about Travis?"

I couldn't lie to him. I couldn't stand there and look into that face that wanted me to have faith in it so badly, and tell a lie. "It's the Slasher I'm scared of, Seth. Talking to that cop made it real. I mean, if that detective could find me, then the Slasher could, too. I'm sorry I've been a little crazy."

Seth held me in an embrace that could have created world peace. It ripped my heart in two. How could this boy be the Saturday Night Slasher? I wished there were a way I could separate the two of them and just keep this Seth.

I hated how he made me want to trust him. I hated how he made me feel. I wished I could just hate all of him the way I needed to, but I couldn't. Especially not when he broke the tender silence in the room by whispering, "I think my aunt was right, Ellie. I think I'm in love with you."

His declaration was so raw it was terrifying, and yet the way my heart reacted to his confession was even scarier. "Seth," I breathed. "I—I don't know what to say."

Seth shook his head. "You don't have to say anything. I just needed you to know."

As I stood there battling feelings I couldn't recognize and emotions I didn't know I was capable of, Seth clasped the necklace around my neck. After making sure it was straight, he regarded my overwhelmed expression and then hesitantly brought his lips to mine, giving me time to protest if I needed to.

I didn't protest.

As he gave me the world's most loving, tender, perfect kiss, I realized that my heart belonged to him forever, and nothing in my life has ever caused me more pain. I ripped myself away from him and staggered back, trying to catch my breath. "I'm sorry, Seth," I said, gasping. I took off the necklace and left it on the nightstand as I backed out of his room. "I—I have to go."

I raced downstairs and across the street, pushing away the sound of Seth's voice calling me back, and ignoring the J's stupid taunts. There was only one person in the world that I wanted to see right now and that was Angela. By the time I got to where she was still waiting anxiously for me on our front porch and threw myself into her arms, I was full on crying. No, not crying. I was sobbing.

Somewhere, a new rift was just created in the space-time continuum.

"Ellie?" Angela asked.

I could feel the J's standing behind me and couldn't even begin to imagine their shock.

"What happened?" Jack asked, while Josh demanded, "Did he hurt you?"

"We'll kill him!" Jesse said, and I didn't doubt they'd give it their best shot. They'd get the beating of a lifetime.

"No," I said quickly. "He didn't hurt me. He didn't do anything wrong." I was hit with a new wave of tears. "He did everything right."

Behind me I heard someone mutter, "Chicks."

"Go home, you idiots!" Angela barked over my shoulder. "She'll call you later."

After my once-in-a-lifetime, never-to-be-repeated emotional breakdown on Wednesday, I told Angela everything. She turned out to be a surprisingly good listener and didn't even judge me for being in love with a serial killer. Much. She listened, cheered me up as best she could, and helped me hide my depression from my parents until they left for their vacation later that night.

I'm all for this new sisterhood Angela and I seemed to have, but by the time Saturday came and we were officially on lockdown for the night, I hadn't seen or talked to anyone but her in days, and it was starting to show. "No," I said when she flipped to MTV. "I am not watching this all night. No way."

"Well, you can forget about ESPN."

"Don't you have some boys you can go call or something?" I snapped.

"Don't you have some video games you can go play or something?" she spat back.

I snatched the remote from Angela and started flipping through the channels. "Saturday TV sucks."

"Forget this. I'm going to Rachel's. Mom and Dad aren't even home. They'll never know if we leave."

"You're just gonna leave me here alone?"

"Well, why not? You're probably the safest redhead in southern Michigan. Not only did Detective Pierce say that Seth can't hurt anyone he knows, Seth *loves* you. He's not going to kill you. Besides, it's eight o'clock already. He's probably out stalking his next victim right now."

Almost as if the fates were mocking us, the doorbell rang then, and guess who was standing on our porch? "So, if he's here right now," I whispered to Angela as we peeked out the window, "does that make me his next victim?"

Angela looked both confused and worried. "I don't get it, what's he doing here?" she whispered back.

"You guys," Seth called out in a flat voice. "I can see your shadows through the curtain."

Angela and I jumped away from the window, plastering our backs

against the front door. “What do we do?” I asked. “Do we let him in?”

“I guess. I mean a real girlfriend would,” Angela mused.

“Do you think Detective Pierce is out there watching him? He wouldn’t let anything happen to us. Maybe we *should* let him in.”

“Ellie!” Seth called out, pounding on the door again. “I’m not leaving until we talk.”

“He sounds angry,” I said.

“Ellie, *please*?”

“Actually, he sounds desperate,” Angela said. Her face filled with sympathy and I cringed. She’d not yet been exposed to vulnerable Seth, and it seemed she was just as susceptible to him as I was, because before I could say anything she opened the door.

“Hi Seth,” she started to say, but he stormed right past her, locked the door behind him, and then turned to me.

I backed up until I ran into the wall.

“Were you just never going to speak to me again?” he asked.

That was pretty much the plan. “I’m sorry,” I said with no further explanation. What was I supposed to say? I hate that I’m in love with you, and being around you hurts too much? Even now, as he stood there silently begging me to accept him, my heart and my head were raging a war inside me.

He started to come toward me and in a surprise move Angela stepped to my side, clasping my hand. “She just needed some time, Seth.”

I was impressed by the confidence she displayed. Her protective front made Seth stop, and I was finally able to muster up some courage. *Keep him happy*, I reminded myself. *He can’t know we suspect him*. “Do you want to stay for a little while?”

“Yes.”

I glanced at my sister. She looked wary, but she was leaving the decision up to me. “Come on in, then,” I said with a sigh. “We were just watching TV.”

Seth brushed his fingers against mine as I walked past him. Why did his touch have to be so electric? It sent a current through me, making it impossible for me to break the connection. I looked helplessly at Seth and then gave him what he wanted—my hand.

“Can’t we go up to your room or something?” he asked me in a low voice. His eyes darted to Angela. “You and I have some unfinished business, and I was kind of hoping for a little privacy.”

Unfinished business? I swallowed hard. *Maybe I’m his redhead of choice tonight after all*. “Um.”

“So, Seth, what are your plans this evening? Anything fun?” Angela said, coming to my rescue. She herded us into the TV room before Seth could talk me into going upstairs.

“It’s Saturday. Ellie is my only plan for the night. The amount of fun we have is up to her,” Seth answered, glaring at my sister with contempt. “And you, apparently.”

Angela and I exchanged a startled look. I tried to sit in my dad’s easy chair, but I’d given Seth my hand and he was not about to relinquish it. He tugged me down to the couch with him. “Are you okay?” he asked when I stiffened at his side.

I nodded quickly, but Seth looked like he didn’t believe me. In an attempt to convince him I pulled my feet up underneath me and leaned against him. Bingo. Seth immediately forgot about everything except the fact that I was snuggling with him. He forgot about our “unfinished business” and resolved himself to a long night of watching TV.

Two reruns of *The Simpsons* and an episode of *House* later, I started to doubt Detective Pierce’s promise that this would all be over soon. Seth obviously wasn’t planning on going anywhere or killing anyone tonight. I was going to be stuck being his girlfriend forever. Of course, as I sat there next to him and he lightly massaged the back of my neck, relaxing me into a state of semi-consciousness, I figured there were worse things.

I must have drifted off, because I was startled awake by my sister’s gasp. “What is it?” I asked, blushing as I lifted my head off Seth’s shoulder. Luckily there was no drool.

Seth didn’t let me sit up. “It’s nothing,” he whispered, pulling me back against him. “Go back to sleep.”

“Ellie, look!” Angela said, but it didn’t matter—I’d already seen it.

The eleven o’clock news was on and I was looking at the face of a redhead. But it wasn’t just any redhead. I recognized her instantly as one of the pictures in Seth’s closet. “There was another murder?” I gasped. “Tonight?”

I looked at Angela. She was just as astonished as I was.

“It wasn’t from tonight,” Seth said, interrupting our silent conversation. We both looked at him and waited for him to explain.

“Haven’t you guys seen the news at all the past couple days?”

“I guess not,” Angela said after thinking about it. “Not since our parents left. They’re the news junkies.”

“Why?” I asked.

“They found her last week,” Seth said, pointing to the screen. “But only identified her as one of the Saturday Night victims yesterday,”

“Yesterday?” Angela and I asked together.

“Fifteen-year-old Jennifer McConnelly from Wayne, Michigan,” Seth recited. “Washed up on shore of the Detroit River Wildlife Refuge last week. They think she was dumped near the river and got washed away in that big storm we had.”

“She died two weeks ago?” Angela asked. “The night of that big storm?”

When Seth nodded, Angela looked at me with wide eyes, but I was missing whatever it was she was trying to tell me with that look.

“How come it took them a week to identify her?” I asked.

Seth smirked. “Think about it. It took them a week to find her. She wasn’t in the best condition.”

“Ew.”

“Plus, with the animals in the refuge? I’m surprised they were able to confirm her a Saturday Night victim at all. I bet the Slasher was quite unhappy when she wasn’t found.”

“You almost sound like *you* were unhappy about it,” I grumbled.

I received a glare from Angela, but Seth just shrugged. “It was driving me crazy,” he admitted. “It doesn’t make sense for a serial killer to break pattern. And then there was no murder last Saturday either. I don’t like it.” Seth frowned and pulled me into his arms, squeezing me protectively. “Now that they’ve found Jennifer, I’m sure there will be another victim tomorrow.”

Okay, so maybe that squeeze wasn’t so protective. Maybe he was just getting antsy for Angela to leave the room so he could kill me already.

“Ellie,” Angela said, clearing her throat. She was looking at me with crazy eyes. For the life of me I couldn’t figure out what was suddenly going on with her, so when she said, “Do you still have those black clips I let you borrow? My hair is driving me crazy,” I didn’t question the idiocy of her statement.

I’m sure Seth knew I hadn’t borrowed any hair clips from Angela—you’d have to be a moron not to guess that—but I didn’t care. Angela was freaking out about something, and I was too curious not to find out what she wanted to tell me, so I said, “Uh, yeah. Let me show you where they are.”

Seth really didn’t want to let me get up, so I said, “I’ll be right back,” and brushed my lips against his. That brief kiss offered up spontaneously by me made him smile so big I realized just how affection-starved he was. *Wow, I suck*. The kiss had the desired effect, though. He let me get up without questioning whether or not I was going to run and hide. He was so distracted that I don’t even think he questioned the lie. *I should try that more often*.

Angela stopped at the base of the stairs. After glancing back to make sure Seth hadn’t followed us, I turned to her. “What is it?”

Angela glanced back, too. The coast was still clear. “Ellie,” she squeaked with excitement. “We have to go call Detective Pierce!”

“What? Why?”

“We have to tell him the news about Seth.”

I was totally confused. “What news?”

“Don’t you get it?”

“Um, no?”

“Seth didn’t do it!”

“What?”

“That girl was killed two weeks ago,” Angela said as if that should explain everything.

“And?”

“The night of the big storm?”

“Still not getting it.”

Angela rolled her eyes. “The night Seth spent with you.”

It was so simple that I still didn’t understand. My sister was highly disappointed in my mental capacity at the moment. “If he was with you all night, then he couldn’t have killed that girl,” she said. “He’s not the Slasher. And if he’s not the Slasher, then that means he didn’t hurt Travis either. He’s been telling you the truth!”

“But if he didn’t go after Travis, who did?”

Not that this wasn’t great news, but I’d just started accepting the horrific truth, and now I was just supposed to unbelieve it?

“Who cares?” Angela said. “The only thing Seth is guilty of is being a hottie. You can be his girlfriend now. Like, for real. It’s okay to love him.”

“I don’t know. What about the pictures, and the—”

“He’s a weird crime buff, like you said. Who knows? Ellie, he was with you all night and somewhere all the way across town a girl was murdered. It couldn’t have been him. Detective Pierce said the guy who attacked Travis was no doubt the Slasher. Travis must have just been in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“But—”

“You said yourself, Seth keeps telling you he didn’t touch Travis. And lets be honest, Seth seems like the kind of guy who wouldn’t have a problem admitting if he had gone after Travis. He’s telling the truth. He has to be. That dead girl proves it!”

“But it doesn’t make sense,” I argued.

“Sure it does. You’re just being a chicken because Seth said he loves you.”

“I’m not a chicken.”

“You’re totally a chicken. I’m going to go upstairs to call Detective Pierce right now and tell him the good news. You go back in there and spend some time with your weird-but-not-totally-psychotic boyfriend.”

“You’re going to leave me alone with him?” I couldn’t help my sudden panic.

“See? Chicken. You’ll be fine, I promise.”

I sighed. Maybe I had such a hard time believing Seth’s innocence

because I wanted it so badly. There's just no way it could be that easy. "You're really that sure he's not going to try and kill me the second you disappear?"

"Have I ever steered you in the wrong direction before?" Angela said, turning me to face the family room where Seth was waiting for me. When I said the word "Dave," she rolled her eyes and gave me a little push. I stumbled into the other room and bumped into something solid and very teenage boy like.

"Everything okay in here?" Seth asked suddenly.

I screamed, of course. Well, he'd startled the living daylights out of me. The way Seth can creep up on a person is unsettling.

Angela smiled more brightly at Seth than I'd ever seen her smile at anyone. "Everything's fine. I just didn't realize how tired I was. I think I'm gonna call it quits for the night." She threw me a sarcastic smile and said, "I've got some boys to go call or something. Think you can handle 'Ellie Watch' the rest of the night?"

Seth nodded dumbly, like he still didn't understand what was going on, because the thought that she could be leaving us alone was impossible. I have to admit, it was rather adorable.

"Good. I'm out," Angela said, and then wandered up the stairs.

When we heard her bedroom door shut Seth turned to me, stunned. "Is she really gone? I didn't think she trusted me enough to leave us alone."

No way was I going to explain Angela's sudden change of heart. "I told you Angela's fickle," I said, telling myself I had nothing to be scared of.

"I didn't think you trusted me, either."

All the playfulness was gone from Seth's voice and it made me feel like a jerk. I hadn't trusted him. When I didn't say anything right away he asked, "Why did you run from me? Why haven't you spoken to me in three days? Why won't you even look at me right now?"

I hadn't realized I was staring at my feet. I met his gaze then, and wished I hadn't. Ugh, that face. Why did he have to look at me like that? Freaking Bambi couldn't make me feel worse if I'd been the one to shoot his mom.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. I wished I could find more of my voice, but at least with it shaking the way it was Seth could tell how much I meant what I said.

"What did I do wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said quickly. "You didn't do anything wrong." *If you didn't kill anyone, then you've done absolutely nothing wrong*. "I'm the one who keeps screwing up. I'm a sucky girlfriend."

Seth studied me and either decided that I was telling the truth, or I wasn't going to give up the truth. "You're forgiven," he eventually

said.

Then, in a move so fast it knocked the breath from me, Seth scooped me up and had me pinned beneath him on the couch. “You owe me a makeout session.” I swear that boy is made of pheromones. “And this time—” He was too distracted by my lips to finish his sentence.

I had to turn my head away from his kisses in order to speak. “This time?” I asked.

Seth leaned up and grinned like the devil. “This time there’s nobody to stop us. Your parents are gone. Your sister doesn’t care anymore. I even explained to my aunt that you guys were home alone and needed someone to stay with you, so I don’t have to leave this time. You are *mine* tonight, and I don’t even need an alibi.”

I shuddered at the way he’d called me his. It was so possessive, but in an infuriatingly sexy way that made me want to submit. For a second I did—I got lost in his kiss. Until something clicked into place in the back of my brain.

“Your alibi!” I gasped.

“What?”

“You left!” I scrambled to a sitting position, struggling to push Seth off me. “Last time you were here, you didn’t stay with me the entire time. You left!”

Seth looked all kinds of confused. I suppose I couldn’t blame him. “Yeah?” he said, unsure why I was freaking out. “To talk to my aunt, remember? But I don’t have to this time.” He started with the kissing again and had a hard time stopping enough to say, “I won’t leave you tonight, Ellie.”

Seth continued to kiss me, but I could no longer kiss him back—my head was reeling. I’d been asleep for hours that night. He said he’d only been gone for an hour, but really, he could have left at any point. He had plenty of time to sneak out, kill someone, wash away the evidence, and sneak back in my room after sunrise. The one thing that made my sister so sure he was innocent—his alibi—was one giant black hole.

Seth tried to lay me back down again, but I wouldn’t let him. “Seth, wait,” I said, starting to panic.

I turned my head to the side, but that didn’t stop Seth. His lips grazed my cheek and then went for my ear. “Kiss me, Ellie,” he demanded softly. “Before I go crazy.”

I shivered. “Oh, no. Not the sexy voice. That’s not fair!”

Seth ignored me. “Just kissing,” he said, bringing his mouth back to mine. “Nothing else. I promise. You can handle just kissing.”

Seth proceeded to pull out my ponytail so that he could tangle his fingers in my hair. He was going to win this battle. He was a serial killer and I was going to give in to him. I wanted to give in to him. *I’m*

as psychotic as he is.

"I love you, Ellie. Do you have any idea what that feels like?"

Yes.

"I need you to kiss me. Right now."

Oh, for crap's sake. I kissed him. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him like there was no tomorrow. After all, he was a killer with a taste for redheads—maybe there was no tomorrow for me. *Oh well. If he kills me tonight, at least I'll die happy*.

The kissing stopped instantly. I opened my eyes to figure out what happened and found Seth eying me cautiously. "What did you just say?"

I frowned. *Had I just said something*?

"What did you mean, 'if he kills you tonight you'll die happy?' If who kills you? Me?"

Oops. *Curse my stupid brain*! "Uh…" *Now I'm dead for sure*. "I don't know what you mean. I didn't say anything."

"Ellie." Anger flashed in Seth's eyes and he pulled my hands off his neck. "Don't lie to me. I heard you loud and clear. What did you mean?"

"Nothing," I snapped, my temper flaring in response to his. "And if you're gonna get crabby, then you can leave."

"I don't think so. Not until you talk to me."

I jumped off the couch and Seth was on his feet with his hand locked around my wrist before I could even think of running. "Let go of me."

He didn't. "Explain," he ordered. "Now."

"Screw you."

I pulled away, and when Seth still didn't let me go I balled up my free fist and swung as hard as I could.

I don't think Seth believed I'd ever actually hit him. Or maybe he thought I couldn't. That's the only explanation for the fact that he didn't duck fast enough, and the look of surprise on his face when I clocked him.

Seth stared at me, shocked, and I glared back, my chest still heaving with fury. Slowly, he reached his fingers up to his nose. When he pulled back his hand he examined the blood on his finger with a sense of awe.

I yanked my arm free from him. "Don't. Order. Me. Around!"

"You hit me." He was still baffled by this.

"And I'll do it again if I have to. Get out of my house!"

Seth finally pulled himself out of his stupor. "I'm not leaving while you're acting like a crazy person. What's going on?"

He stepped toward me and I jumped back, swatting his hand away. When he realized how serious I was, he assessed the situation.

Unfortunately, he decided tackling me was the way to go. He rushed me, but this time I saw it coming and he wasn't going to get me so easily. It took him four times as long to pin me to the ground with my hands behind my back this time, and once I was finally rendered helpless we were both exhausted.

"You're getting much better at that," he said, and he had the nerve to sound amused. If I were facing him, I would have spit in his face.

I already knew it was no use struggling, but that didn't mean I didn't. I struggled and struggled and struggled until my body ached. Then I screamed in frustration when I was forced to give up. "I hate you!"

"No, you don't."

This set me off again and Seth spoke over my thrashing and cursing. "You know I'm sorry for this, but you are too stubborn for your own good, and you're not acting rationally right now. Tell me why you think I am going to kill you."

I answered him by thrashing again so hard that I nearly pulled my arm from its socket. Part of me wanted to rip it from my shoulder just so that Seth would feel bad, but before I could work up the guts to do that, Seth leaned his head down to mine.

"Please calm down," he begged. I hated that he sounded full of concern. "I can't handle this game you're playing. Something is wrong. Something has been wrong all week and you need to tell me what it is. The truth this time, please. I can't help you unless you trust me."

"I know it's you, all right!" I yelled, defeated. "I know you killed those girls! And if you're going to kill me, then just do it already, because I can't take this anymore! I hate you! I hate you for making me feel things about you that I shouldn't!"

"Ellie!" Seth gasped. "What are you talking about? I haven't killed anyone!"

"Now who's the liar?"

"I'm not lying! How could you even think that?"

"They found Travis' car!" I screamed, and then all the fight left me. I couldn't yell anymore. "That's what that detective you saw me and Angela talking to was saying. They found Travis' car and inside there was a knife that had both Travis' DNA and DNA from two of the Saturday Night girls."

That's when the fight left Seth. I felt his body go limp. He stumbled as he climbed off me. When I rolled over onto my back, Seth was sitting there looking ghostly white. I doubt he would have been capable of even standing at the moment if he'd tried.

He looked scared, which made me want to comfort him. I hated him for that. But I also couldn't help myself. "I didn't want to believe it, Seth. I'm sorry. I tried not to. But he was so sure."

"If that's true, why come to you? Why tell you that? Why not just arrest me?"

"Because he doesn't have hard proof that you attacked Travis. He needs you to go after another girl. He said I couldn't break up with you, because you'd figure out we knew. He said I was a good distraction for you and told me to keep you happy." I couldn't stop myself from smirking bitterly. "I pretty much failed that assignment big time."

"Believe me," Seth said with a harsh laugh. "His plan worked like a charm. You've kept me plenty distracted this week. *Too distracted*."

Seth rose to his feet and began pacing the room. "I should have figured it out," he chastised himself. "I saw him with you and didn't question it. I knew something was wrong with you. I even knew you lied to me on Wednesday, but I was so worried about you that I didn't put it together. How could I have been so stupid?"

Now he was angry. Angry that he'd been discovered, and angry that he'd let a girl distract him into screwing up his otherwise perfect operation.

Seth lost himself in thought and pulled his knife from his back pocket. My blood turned to ice in my veins as I watched him mindlessly flip it open and closed. As I was contemplating my chances of escape if I bolted for the door right now—which were poor considering he was on his feet now and he'd pounce on me the second I tried to stand—Seth's eyes suddenly flashed down at me. "This detective," he said. "He's with the FBI?"

He seemed almost crazy now. I figured it wasn't wise to give him any more crap. I shook my head. "Detroit PD."

"He wanted to use you as bait, and you just went along with it?"

"He didn't use me. He just said that if you knew I knew your secret, you'd try to kill me. He said not breaking up with you was the only way to keep me safe. He promised he'd keep an eye on me. He said he knew you wouldn't hurt me."

"I'll bet he did," Seth muttered.

I had to look away as I said my next words, because I was ashamed for believing them. "I thought I knew it, too," I whispered pathetically. "Even if I thought you were killing girls that look just like me, I was sure you would never hurt *me*. That's why I went along with it. And that's why I was so upset Wednesday—because I couldn't make myself hate you. I couldn't not like it when you kissed me. You told me you love me and I—I—you're a *serial killer*! And stupid me couldn't help falling for you anyway."

Seth's anger vanished. He smiled so lovingly it hurt. "You're right," he teased. "That was stupid of you. Not that I don't appreciate it."

My jaw dropped. "Is this a joke to you?"

"No!" Seth said, all of his anger returning in an instant. Man, do I have a talent for making him lose his temper or what?

"It's not a joke. And I can't believe you're not taking it more seriously. You're in danger, Ellie. Real danger. Do you realize that?"

Seth was one hundred percent serious, and his tone was harsher than I'd ever heard it. It was the first time I really truly believed he was going to do it. He was going to kill me. It was only a matter of time now. *Well, he's not getting me without a fight.*

"And what about your parents?" he continued to rant. "I can't believe your parents went along with this. And left you alone on top of that."

"Are you kidding? My parents don't know anything about any of this. When Detective Pierce found out we hadn't told anyone, he made us keep it a secret. He was afraid of tipping you off. He was afraid if my parents canceled their trip you might get spooked and kill me."

"Wait. He knows you're home alone this weekend?"

Seth's eyes narrowed and his whole body went rigid. He grabbed my arm and yanked me to my feet. "We're getting out of here right now," he said.

It took me a few steps before the realization hit. This was it. "The hell we are!" I said, ripping my hand from his. I was surprised he hadn't been holding on tighter. I tried to book it up the stairs, but he caught me by the ankle.

"You don't still believe I want to kill you?" Seth asked incredulously.

I knew it would only be a matter of seconds before he had me pinned again, but I was close enough now that Angela might hear me over the stereo blasting from her room.

"Angela!" I screamed. "Angela! Call Detective Pierce!"

"Ellie, stop! Just wait!"

"Get away from me!" I kicked backward and managed to hit Seth in the face hard enough that he let go. I scrambled up the stairs. If I could just get to my sister's room, we could lock the door and wait for the cops to show up.

Seth was too fast. He flew at me as we reached the top of the stairs. He had me on the floor again. "Angela!" I screamed.

"Ellie, just listen to me for a second! You can't call him!" Seth shouted at me. "Don't you get it? Serial killings are handled by the FBI, not—"

Seth cut off mid-sentence and let out a cry of pain. Then Angela screamed and Seth fell limp on top of me.

"Angela!" I yelled. "Angela, what happened? Are you okay? Angela!"

I pushed Seth's body off me and found my terrified sister standing

over us, holding Seth's taser. "Are you okay?" she asked, her hands shaking and tears streaming down her face.

Seth coughed my name, not quite unconscious, and when he tried to reach his hand toward me, Angela and I both screamed and my frantic sister zapped him again. I had to pry the thing out of her hands before she let go of the trigger. This time Seth was out cold.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to do that to someone more than once,” I breathed as I poked Seth’s unconscious form. It was the only thing I could concentrate on at the moment—my brain’s way of dealing with my fear. I cringed at how bloody his face was. I guess I’d kicked him pretty good.

Angela and I were both so shaken that when the doorbell rang we screamed again before realizing who it would be.

“Detective Pierce!” Angela gasped.

We ran down the stairs and flailed ourselves into the startled policeman’s arms. Yeah, he was a little shocked to find two hysterical teenage girls suddenly clinging to him.

Angela and I both launched into the story at the same time, until Detective Pierce laughed and pulled us off him. “Girls,” he said calmly. “One at a time, please.”

I stepped back, able to calm myself faster than my sister. I let her do the talking, since I doubted she was capable of stopping herself. She seemed to be in shock.

As Angela clung to the detective’s jacket and began to explain that Seth tried to kill me and was now unconscious in the upstairs hallway, Detective Pierce stepped in the house and slowly closed the door behind him, sliding the deadbolt into place. He held a supportive arm around my sister, listening carefully to her story, but he never took his eyes off me—his crazed, hungry eyes.

I realized it just a second too late.

Detective Pierce recognized the moment that understanding hit me. He smiled.

Ugh, Ellie, you stupid, stupid, stupid idiot! Seth was right. I’m too stubborn for my own good. “He was trying to tell me, but I wouldn’t stop to listen.”

“The kid had it figured out, did he?” Detective Pierce laughed. “I knew he was trying. Why do you think I needed you to distract him—ah, ah, Ellie,” he said when my body tensed. “Have a little patience.”

Angela pulled her face out of Detective Pierce’s chest and only had time to ask, “Wha—” before the psycho whirled her around and trapped her tight against his body. I never saw when he grabbed a

knife, but he suddenly had it pressed against her throat.

Angela and I both froze.

"E—E—Ellie?"

"Don't move, Ang," I warned her. Then I focused my gaze on Detective Pierce. He still hadn't taken his eyes off me. I'm not even sure he'd blinked. *And I thought Seth was creepy*.

"Don't worry, Ellie," the Detective said, "I'll give you a sporting chance—looking forward to it, actually. Just not quite yet."

Detective Pierce finally broke his stare to grin at my sister in a way that would give me nightmares later. I was glad Angela couldn't see him.

"What about her," I asked, pushing my hysteria back as best I could. My voice still shook, though. "Will you give her the same sporting chance?"

Detective Pierce gave Angela a calculating look. "I could," he mused. Then his eyes locked on me again. "But you and I both know it wouldn't matter. You're not a fighter," he whispered into Angela's ear. "Are you honey?"

Detective Pierce slowly slid the blade of his knife down Angela's throat catching it on the collar of her shirt. The material dipped low enough to show her cleavage. She gasped and tears started to stream down her cheeks.

I watched, horrified, as Detective Pierce laughed and then licked the tears off her face. "Stop it!" I shrieked, while Angela began to sob.

I couldn't hold back my own tears any longer, but instead of panic overtaking me, my fear turned to rage. I shifted my weight onto the balls of my feet. I didn't have a clue what I was going to do, but no way was I going to let that creep hurt my sister.

"Careful, Ellie," Detective Pierce warned. But the way his voice purred, I think he was hoping I would try it.

"Let her go."

Detective Pierce let out a harsh laugh.

"You'll never get through us both," I said, trying to sound stronger than I felt. "You know I'm not just going to stand here and wait for you to finish with her, and she's not really the one you want."

"That's not entirely true," Detective Pierce said, though he couldn't hide his desire. Angela definitely wasn't who he was after. He wanted me so bad that he could hardly stay focused. "I'd hate for Angela to miss out on any fun. After all, I'm very grateful to your sister. Your stupid, imaginative, ridiculous, silly, brilliant sister." He kissed the side of her head and sighed. "When you filed that report, you gave me a gift. Two gifts."

Angela gasped at his words. "It's my fault," she sobbed. "All of your victims have had criminal records. That's how you were finding them.

You never would have found Ellie if I hadn't called the police about Seth."

"Not in a million years," Pierce agreed conversationally. "But she's so deliciously perfect. Seth, too—with his accident, his parents' deaths, a violent temper, and a personality disorder? I couldn't have created a better scapegoat if I'd conjured him out of thin air."

"Ellie," Angela sobbed. "I'm so sorry!"

"Don't be sorry," Detective Pierce told her. "You've saved lives. Who knows how many other girls I would have gone after if you didn't give me such a beautiful way out?"

This didn't exactly make Angela feel any better. She began to cry so hard that Detective Pierce could hardly hold on to her. I tried to ignore her. I couldn't afford the distraction. I figured if I could just keep him talking long enough, Seth would wake up and call the police. Or maybe kill the psycho. Either option was fine with me.

"You attacked Travis," I said, putting the pieces together. "After Seth got in trouble for threatening Travis, you attacked him to make Seth look guilty."

"How could I resist? With my knife connecting Travis and the Saturday Night murders? Once they find the two of you in the morning, no jury in the world will let Seth walk."

Detective Pierce was starting to get restless. His knife was falling away from Angela's neck as he resisted the urge to attack me. I saw an opportunity to distract him. Of course, that meant provoking him into coming after me. I just hoped Angela had good sense enough to run for it as soon as he did.

"You talk a big game for a guy who only goes after starving runaways and crack addicts."

The danger I'd seen flash so often in Seth's eyes was now overpowering Pierce's stare. My defiance was exciting him. "True," he said. "Which is why this is going to be very, very interesting."

I looked into his wild eyes. His pupils were dilated so large that all I could see was black. My heart raced. There was so much adrenaline coursing my veins, I don't think it was physically possible to feel panicked. I knew that would come when it was all over. In fact, I bet I'd be more screwed up than Seth if I survived this. But right now I could only focus on the game. And this *was* a game. A sick, twisted game.

Well, I wasn't going to let the Saturday Night Slasher beat me any more than I'd ever let Dave beat me in a game of one-on-one. I channeled all the crazy energy my fear was giving me, squared my shoulders, and pulled my shaking hands into tight fists. "Bring it."

Okay, I'll admit I'm not always the smartest person in the world, and I had a feeling what I was about to do was just about the stupidest

thing I could have possibly done, but I figured rushing him would be the last thing he expected me to do.

Before I could chicken out, I ran at him. I was right that it surprised him and he had to shove Angela out of the way in order to fend off my attack. He threw my lightweight-of-a-sister so hard that she slammed her head into the front door and landed in a heap on the floor. She was in shock and probably had a massive headache, but at least her throat hadn't been slashed.

Things, however, weren't looking quite so good for me. I'd managed to get my sister out of harms way, but I'd also managed to get grabbed from behind. "I hope that's not all you've got, Ellie."

It's not.

Detective Pierce was a huge guy, but he obviously hadn't taken the same self-defense classes that Seth had been taking for years. He hadn't lifted my feet off the ground the way Seth always did, making it possible for me to stomp down on his foot, and he'd wrapped his arms around my shoulders instead of at my elbows, giving me more than enough wiggle room to throw my elbow back into his ribs. The blow was enough for me to break away from him and I took off through the house, headed for the back door.

"Ellie!" he shouted, and just like I'd hoped, he forgot all about Angela and came running after me.

If it weren't for the stupid kitchen table that stood between the sliding glass door and me, I would have been outside and able to make enough noise to alert the cavalry. I started to go around the table, but Detective Pierce caught up to me. "You're going to have to do better than that," he said, grabbing me by my hair.

As he yanked me backwards I was able to grab hold of a chair and I swung it around as hard as I could. Unlike any of the times I've seen Chuck Norris smash someone with a chair in the movies, the thing didn't shatter into a million pieces—which was totally disappointing—but it did leave a giant gash on the side of his face. Judging from the look he gave me, I was definitely the first Saturday Night girl to bloody him up.

I got to the back door, but it was locked, and before I could slide it open, a very pissed off serial killer picked me up and slammed me down onto the kitchen counter. My head hit in almost the same spot I'd busted it at the beginning of the summer, and those floating black spots in my vision came back for a visit. My eyes rolled for a moment, but snapped into focus when I burst into searing pain so hot that I thought I was being lit on fire.

For a minute I couldn't think. All I could do was scream from the pain as Pierce dragged his knife across my stomach. It wasn't deep enough to spill my guts or anything, but that's how this guy operated

—he'd make it last.

"That's right, Ellie," he cooed. "Scream for me, my little fighter."

His voice brought me out of the pain and I realized he was on top of me. I became frantic—thrashing as violently as I could, even though it caused my stomach to catch fire all over again. I got one of my arms free and punched him. But thanks to the muscles in my stomach being sliced up, I couldn't get enough force to knock the man twice my size off me. The sicko liked it when I hit him, though.

I tried a new tactic and started feeling around my head for something on the counter, but the only things within my reach were a stack of mail, Angela's purse, and the keys to my Jeep. *The keys to my Jeep*!

My tiny pink Swiss Army knife had never looked more beautiful. Seth told me when he'd given it to me that it would never ward off a serial killer, but I was willing to test the theory. I snatched it up and pulled the blade open with my teeth, then jammed it as hard as I could into whatever part of Pierce's body was the closest. The little inch-long blade jabbed all the way into his forearm, and though it wasn't exactly a fatal wound, it had to have hurt like freaking hell.

I had completely thrown him off his game. When he stumbled back, I did the only thing I could think of to do, which was to pull the knife out of his arm and start stabbing him again. "How do you like it, you psycho!" I screamed as I jammed my knife into his arm a good two or three more times.

Um, apparently he didn't like it, because he called me the B word—the real B word, not the one I occasionally call Seth—and stuck his much bigger knife into my stomach for real this time.

It's funny, because I felt it, and I knew exactly what was happening, but it's like the pain was so intense that it simply stopped hurting. The stab wound hadn't hurt nearly as bad as the slice job he'd done a minute ago. I didn't even scream. I just sort of gasped and got really cold.

I waited for something more—for him to pull the knife out and stab me again, or at the very least say some creepy comment, or put his slimy fingers on me—but none of that came. Instead, there was the sound of a skull cracking and Angela's blood curdling scream.

I opened my eyes as Pierce dropped to the ground, and there was my sister, holding a frying pan with smears of blood on it. She was shaking so hard that she could barely hold onto it. "Ellie!" she cried. "Just hold on. I already called the cops!"

"Where's Seth?" I asked, but when I spoke I coughed up a tiny bit of blood and Angela went into hysterics again.

A minute or so later, everything turned to chaos as a million cops swarmed my house. Angela was whisked away, as well as the

unconscious serial killer. I was surrounded by a team of paramedics. Whatever they injected into my body, bless their hearts, didn't just take the pain away, it was going to let me sleep through the part where they took the knife out of my stomach. I'm fairly certain that was a good thing. I was already drifting off as they put me on the stretcher, but I could just barely recognize the person being helped down the stairs as I was carried out the front door.

Seth's eyes locked with mine for the briefest moment. The only word I could think of to describe the look on his face was 'haunted'. I tried to call out to him, but I had this stupid mask on my face, and I just plain didn't have the energy to do anything more than whisper. Anyway, I was sure he didn't hear me. I drifted off into unconsciousness after that.

I was sure Seth was never going to speak to me again, but hoped I was wrong when I woke up and felt a hand locked on mine so tightly that I couldn't feel my fingers.

"Seth?"

"Ellie!"

Nope. It was Angela. Not the person I'd hoped for, but surprisingly she was better.

"Hey, sis," I said, happy to see her unscathed. Well, relatively unscathed. Her eyes were all red and puffy, her nose was swollen with snot running from it, and she had this tiny gash above her eye that was taped shut with a butterfly strip. The sick part was, she still looked gorgeous. No doubt she'd have the entire male population of Canton—possibly all of Michigan—falling all over themselves to nurse her back to health. "You look like crap."

Angela let go this half-hysterical laugh/cry thing and very weepily said, "I'm so sorry. All of this was my fault."

"And yet I'm the one who got skewered, while you walked away with just a bump on the head. Where's the justice in that?"

I felt like a total jerk when Angela burst into tears. "Oh, my gosh, Ang, I was totally kidding!"

"But it's true!" she wailed.

"Maybe," I said, taking on a serious tone. "But you were only trying to protect me, and, in the end, you did save my life."

Angela looked up at me and frowned.

"Detective Pierce was huge, and you took him out with one blow," I explained. I didn't even have to fake the pride in my voice. "We need to get you in a game sometime. I'll bet you have a brutal slap shot."

Angela was startled, knowing the depth of the compliment I was giving her. I laughed at the expression on her face and said, "You may be girlie, but you're still a Westley."

Angela sniffled, but her face looked hopeful. “So then, you don’t hate me?”

“You’re my big sister. Of course I hate you,” I said, but I cracked a smile.

“You’re such a liar.”

Angela and I had a good laugh and she leaned over my bed to squeeze me—this hugging thing was getting easier for us.

“Speaking of lying,” I said after a moment. “Have you talked to Mom and Dad?”

Angela cringed. “Oh, yeah. We’re toast. The FBI sent a helicopter to their cruise ship to get them. If I were you, I’d play up the traumatized victim angle as much as possible, because the FBI told them that we’d been talking with Detective Pierce behind their backs for a couple weeks now. Their plane lands in about two hours, and then we’re pretty much grounded indefinitely.”

“It’s a good thing we came now, then.”

Angela and I were startled by the intrusion—guess we’ll both always be a lot more jumpy now.

I was really surprised to see Dave standing in the doorway to my hospital room, considering he hadn’t spoken to me since Travis’ attack—none of the guys had. Even more surprising still was when Greg and Sanchez followed him into the room.

Dave came up to my bedside and pulled a giant bouquet of roses from behind his back. Red ones. My jaw dropped at the sight and I pulled my eyes up to meet Dave’s smirk. “For the love of—do not tell me you’re hoping for another shot.”

“Relax, Westley. I learned my lesson the first time.” Dave turned to my sister and handed her the flowers. “These are actually for you,” he said, shrugging. “I was—I’m glad you’re okay.”

As Angela took the flowers—and actually *blushed*—I scoffed. “Seriously? Dude. I got knifed and you give *her* flowers? You suck.”

Dave burst out laughing. “Sorry. I didn’t think you were the flowers type.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Is too,” Greg said. He and Sanchez had come around to the other side of my bed. “We didn’t get you flowers, because we thought you’d like this better.”

He and Sanchez exchanged smiles and then Sanchez pulled a Barbie-doll sized Steve Yzerman bobble head from behind his back. They’d put a Freddie Kruger mask on him and super-glued a Swiss Army knife the size of my keychain in place of his hockey stick. They’d whited-out Yzerman on the back of the jersey and written Westley in its place with a Sharpie.

“You guys are tools,” I said. But I was hugging the treasured doll to

my chest. “And this is much better than flowers. Thanks.”

As Dave was ruffling my hair and Greg was slapping me five we heard the sound of sneakers skidding to a halt on the slick hospital floor. I looked up in time to see a three-J pile up.

“What the hell is this?” Jesse asked.

“Back the freak up off our woman,” Josh ordered.

Dave, Greg, and Sanchez suddenly flanked me on both sides, creating a very distinct “us verses them” situation. Dave smirked, sitting on the edge of my bed so he could throw his arm over my shoulder. “Sorry, guys. We scammed your goods this summer,” he announced. “And we’re not giving her back without a fight.”

“What’s he talking about, Westley?” Jack asked, shooting me an accusatory glare.

I just shrugged, but Sanchez piped up: “Whaddya say, Westley?” he asked. “You wanna show these summer camp sissies what real game is?”

Now that I’m a lady—well, less crude than I was at the beginning of the summer, anyway—I will not repeat the trash talk this earned them from the J’s. Needless to say, it almost came down to a friendly schoolyard brawl and ended with a promise for the street hockey showdown of the century just as soon as I was able to play again. Well, that and a handful of nurses kicking everyone except Angela out to make room for my next set of visitors.

I was exhausted. I didn’t exactly want any more visitors, especially when those visitors were two guys whose stiff suits screamed ‘federal agents’. But then Seth shuffled in behind them.

I felt my heart skip a beat. Or two. Or three. I really hadn’t believed he’d ever speak to me again after everything I’d done to him. Everything I’d accused him of. I was happy to see that he was okay, and hated myself for the way his face was black and blue from where I’d kicked him. But mostly I felt sick at the way he wouldn’t look at me.

Seth’s eyes were glued to the floor and he hesitated at the threshold of my room. Clearly he did not want to be here. Clearly he didn’t even want to see me ever again. I felt what I think was my heart breaking, and the way my stomach started churning didn’t do much for the recovering stab wound in my gut.

I felt a reassuring squeeze on my fingers and looked over to see Angela’s hand holding mine. She smiled, but her eyes were full of concern for me.

“There’s my two heroes,” one of the suits said in a booming, jolly voice.

He was referring to Angela and me. I couldn’t help but stammer, “H—heroes?”

The guy chuckled like a lean, less-bearded Santa Clause. “The two of you stopped a serial killer last night. I’d say that’s pretty heroic.” He came to shake Angela’s hand and mine. “Frank Gambini, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It is truly a pleasure to meet you both. Especially you, Eleanor. Seth has told me so much about you.”

I glanced at Seth and he quickly jerked his head away. He’d been watching me, but he still couldn’t meet my eyes. “I—He—?”

“He was very concerned for your safety, Eleanor. He’s been working with Agent Johnson here”—he gestured to the other suit—“to try and solve the case.”

I looked closely at the tall silent guy standing next to Seth, and recognition hit me. He was the guy that met Seth in the sushi place. It wasn’t an illegal exchange after all. Seth had called in a favor to his friend, the director of the FBI, so that he could try to make me safe.

I was so flattered and grateful that Seth would go to such crazy lengths for me that I suddenly blurted, “But he did solve it!” I wanted everyone to know how amazing he was. And I especially wanted Seth to know that I knew what he’d done. “He knew before…” I couldn’t finish that sentence so I said, “He tried to tell me. I was just too thick to listen.”

Mr. Gambini raised a brow at Seth. “Is that true, Bishop?” he asked, startling Seth into raising his gaze from the floor. “You figure it out?”

Seth looked at Mr. Gambini and shifted uncomfortably. “Yes, sir. Just barely.”

“And you didn’t think to call Agent Johnson *before* these ladies were attacked?”

“I was about to, sir. But…” Seth’s eyes finally flashed to me, but he quickly looked back at Mr. Gambini. “But my girlfriend and her sister kicked my ass before I could, sir.”

Angela and I both winced. We both pretty much felt like crap about what we did to poor, innocent Seth.

Mr. Gambini didn’t seem as concerned about it. He roared with a laughter that rattled the halls. “That is quite the feat,” he said, smiling at us. “I’ve seen young Mr. Bishop take down some of my highly trained agents.”

Mr. Gambini continued to rattle on about the physical condition of Detective Pierce too, and thanked us for taking it easy on Seth, but I couldn’t really listen. Not after what Seth had just said.

When I couldn’t take it anymore, I interrupted the director of the FBI—which my mother would have killed me for doing—and said to Seth, “Don’t you mean ex-girlfriend?” I couldn’t hide the shock in my voice.

Seth finally looked at me, and for once I couldn’t read his

expression. There were way too many emotions painted in it to single any one out.

"Um," I said, trying to ignore the fact that everyone in the room was now staring at me. "I assumed accusing you of being a murderer, messing up your face, and my sister nearly tasing you to death was sufficient grounds for a dumping."

"Sorry about that, by the way," Angela interrupted, cringing again.

"Are you saying you still *want* to be my girlfriend?"

Um, DUH! I blushed under Seth's gaze, regretting that I'd brought up the subject. I really wished all these people would leave.

As if reading my mind, my lovely sister smiled at Mr. Gambini and asked, "Have you guys seen the cafeteria here yet? I'm starving, and that cop from earlier said I wasn't allowed to go anywhere unescorted until my parents got here."

Mr. Gambini's face brightened. "Lunch sounds like a fantastic idea," he said. "Come on, Johnson, you can help me fill Ms. Westley in on the questioning process."

"Oh, about all that? When you get our statements and stuff, do you think you could mention that hero bit to my parents? Like, a lot?" Angela asked as they walked out the door. I heard Mr. Gambini laugh all the way to the elevator.

The room was suddenly empty, save Seth and me. It was so quiet, it was almost loud. I needed to break the silence. "Um…" Seth was staring at his feet again and hadn't moved from his spot against the wall next to the exit. I half expected him to bolt. "For what it's worth, I really am sorry. I know that's not going to help you hate me any less, but—"

"Hate you?" Seth gasped. "I don't hate you."

"That is a lie! You can't even *look* at me anymore!"

Seth glared at me, making me feel bad for losing my temper. "Because I can't stand to see you like that!" he yelled back, and then slunk down the wall to the floor. His voice was suddenly nothing more than a whisper. "I promised I'd keep you safe, and look at you."

"Yes, look at me. I *am* safe," I said, hoping the grin I gave him would be catching. It wasn't.

"You know what I mean."

"All right, fine. But it's not your fault. You didn't know how pig-headed I am when you made that promise. And besides, you did keep me safe. If you hadn't tipped me off about Detective Pierce, things could have gone much worse. I'm the idiot that took too long to get it. I'm the idiot who fell for Pierce's crap. I'm the idiot who thought you were capable of…" I felt my stomach churn again. "How do you not hate me?"

"I was being set up, Ellie. By a cop. And he was doing a really good

job of it. I don't blame you at all for listening to him and wanting to protect yourself. In fact, I'm proud of you."

Wow. Are we a messed up pair or what?

"Okay, so you don't blame me and I don't blame you," I said. "How about we both stop feeling like dirt and just agree that my scars are going to be so much more impressive than that puny little thing on your chest?"

Seth was startled for moment. He finally came to my bedside with the strangest combination of sadness and joy in his eyes. "Fine. But you never answered my question."

"What question?"

"Do you still want to be my girlfriend?" His voice shook like he was scared to death of my answer. "Because I'm pretty sure you said you hated me several times last night."

I smiled at his question, because the answer was so ridiculously obvious. This was exactly what I'd wanted for a long time now. This was my Seth—sweet, vulnerable Seth, who looked at me like I was the whole universe, as well as a tasty morsel of something he couldn't wait to devour. He still screamed of danger, but now I didn't have to feel guilty for being drawn to that danger.

"Yeah," I told him. "But I also admitted to falling for you."

Seth tried to hide his reaction from me, but he had a hard time keeping everything in. He reached into his pocket. I thought he was going for his knife, but instead he pulled out the necklace he'd tried to give me on Wednesday. "Will you keep it this time, please?"

Seth didn't wait for an answer before he clasped the chain around my neck.

As he reached around behind me, closing the distance that had been between us, my body, I am ashamed to say, went completely haywire. My heart sped, I shivered, my breath caught… And, um, yeah, Seth was not exactly oblivious.

Seth gave me his most amused "Oh, Ellie" sigh yet, and then sat back. "So, which is it?" he asked, the smile on his face turning dangerously confident. "Do you love me or hate me?"

"I—"

Snapping my jaw shut, I narrowed my eyes as I realized he was playing with me. He was trying to get me to say it. The L word. Not just the L word, but the whole thing, complete with the "I" and the "you."

"Fat chance, buddy." *You're not getting me to say 'I love you' that easy, even if it is true*.

Seth suppressed a smile and crossed his arms over his chest. "You are aware that I heard that, right?"

CRAP!

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BONUS MATERIAL

"HOUSE HUNTING"
(Seth's first glimpse of Ellie)

This was going to be the longest summer of my life. I'd been in Michigan for exactly six hours and twenty-three minutes, and I already knew I hated it here. The air was so thick you could almost drink it, and there were too many trees. Everywhere you looked it was trees. Trees and concrete.

If the hot, humid air and trees weren't enough to suffocate me, the thought of having to live with a bunch of uncultured, simple, Middle Americans would definitely do it. After driving all around the Detroit metro area today looking at houses, I've learned that these people's idea of sports cars were either Mustangs or Camaros, and fine dining equaled Applebees and Outback Steakhouse. I'd never see a decent California Roll again.

And would it kill them to listen to something other than hip-hop?

Just as we were passing yet another dilapidated strip mall, we turned into a neighborhood called Brookhurst. "I know you're just going to love this one," the real estate lady cried from the front seat. "This neighborhood in particular has so much character!"

"What do you think Seth?" My Aunt Janice said, meeting my eyes in the rearview mirror.

One word came to mind. Hell. Technically, the map said Hell was about an hour Northwest of here, but still. This was close enough. Of course, I couldn't exactly say that to my aunt. I was the one who picked this crap city. Seriously, what was I thinking?

I shrugged noncommittally. "It's not Beverly Hills."

"But that's the adventure, right Seth?"

Aunt Janice sounded like she was trying to convince herself more than me. I could tell from the look on her face at each of the last five houses we'd looked at that she was just as impressed as I was.

"Okay, here we are!"

That real estate lady was way too perky for her own good. I sort of wanted to stab her. I might have been subconsciously considering it, because as we walked up to the front door of what I prayed would not be my future residence, my knife had somehow found it's way into my hand and I was flipping it open and closed. Aunt Janice gets on my case when I do that.

I tucked the knife back in the pocket of my jeans and when the real estate lady went to show my aunt the kitchen I wandered up stairs where I wouldn't hear her voice anymore.

I guessed the bedrooms were decent sized enough, but whoever decorated this place—back in what I could only imagine was like 1972—had a thing for nasty shag carpet, wood paneling, and wallpaper the colors of red, burnt orange, and gold. It was like someone had puked up autumn inside this house.

I'd seen enough. I didn't care if I was a spoiled, rich brat from Beverly Hills. This whole idea that we experience middle class was bogus.

I was literally heading out of the bedroom with the purpose of marching downstairs to demand that Aunt Janice forget this asinine plan and take me home when, suddenly, someone in the neighborhood decided to disturb the peace with Social Distortion. My curiosity betrayed me. I forgot about my current mission and wandered over to the window.

The music was coming from the house directly across the street and the upstairs window that mirrored the one I was standing in was wide open.

I leaned against the window and waited to see if I could catch a glimpse of the neighbor. Despite the good taste in music, I did not want to be stuck living across the street from some tool. I really didn't have much tolerance for most people my age. Guys especially.

A heavy backpack flew out the window onto the roof above the garage, and then a tall redhead wearing a sports jersey big enough to drown her followed it.

My breath caught in my lungs. She was gorgeous. But she was the kind of gorgeous that didn't know what she was. Her long, straight, fiery hair was pulled back into a haphazard ponytail, exposing a long slender neck. I couldn't see her eyes, but even from all the way across the street I could tell that her full pink lips would be perfect for kissing. I couldn't really see her figure underneath her baggy clothes but as she settled in against the side of her house, I could tell she had a leanness to her that suggested she was a serious athlete.

She was doing her homework on the roof, blaring rock, and eating what could only be mint-chip ice cream. She had a can of Redi-whip sitting beside her, but she didn't put it on her ice cream like a normal person. She would take a bite of ice cream and then chase it with whipped cream sprayed directly from the can into her mouth.

I was completely mesmerized by this odd girl, and, oh, how I wanted to be that can of whipped cream. No, I wanted to take that can of whipped cream and…

I jumped when I heard voices come up the stairs behind me. I pretended to be checking out the closet space when Aunt Janice and the real estate lady entered the room. "So…?" Aunt Janice asked.

I could hear the hope in her voice. She knew I wasn't thrilled to be

moving, and that I was even less thrilled with having to downgrade from the posh lifestyle I was accustomed to. The poor woman wanted so desperately for me to find something I liked.

I'd found something I liked, all right. But it wasn't this crappy house.

"Yeah," I said, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible. "I might be feeling this one."

Aunt Janice's eyes lit up. "Okay," she squeaked, trying to contain her relief. Sometimes it was hard for her to dial back her intensity. "Well, you just take all the time you need. Get a feel for the place. We'll take a quick walk down the street and check out the neighborhood a bit."

"Sounds good."

"Kay." Aunt Janice jumped forward to wrap me in an excited hug. "Love you, Seth. You're an amazing kid."

I tried not to roll my eyes. Or smile. My aunt could be ridiculous sometimes. Always trying to makeup for my childhood. Always wanting to make sure that I knew I had someone who loved me. I'd never admit it to her, but I loved the affection. It didn't even embarrass me anymore. *Love you too, Aunt Janice*. "See you in a few minutes."

After I was sure my aunt and the real estate lady were gone, I went back over to the window. To my relief, the redhead was still sitting there. Her empty bowl of ice cream was set aside now, replaced with a can of Dr. Pepper. Not even diet. I didn't realize girls could eat ice cream and drink regular soda. Her head bobbed along to the music, and whatever she was scribbling in her notebook looked more like a drawing than any math problem or book report.

A big yellow school bus zipped down the street and stopped a few houses away. A minute later three guys came clomping up the street, laughing obnoxiously. I tensed when I realized they were headed for *her* house. Was one of these idiots her boyfriend?

"Westleeeeeeeey!" they all three called out in unison.

I relaxed a little. That didn't seem like boyfriend behavior. Especially not when one of them addressed her next as, "Dude!"

"Dude! Where've you been? You totally missed it! Someone messed up Gabby Reese's face this morning. She's gonna have a fat shiner for Prom."

The girl, Westley—I assumed it was a last name—put down her soda. "I didn't miss it, dillweed. I *did* it."

Did what? Messed up that girl's face?

"You did not!"

My mystery girl shrugged. "She questioned my sexual preference in a highly offensive way, so my fist questioned the proximity of her face

in an even more offensive way."

I felt my eyebrows hit the ceiling. She'd said it so casually, and smiled, not proudly, but like she found the whole ordeal amusing. I'd never seen a girl more relaxed, more natural. So comfortable in her own skin.

"Hence my absence at school today," she continued to explain. "I got sent home with a three-day suspension."

One of the guys turned to the first one and held out a hand. "Pay up, loser. I told you that was Westley's handiwork."

The first one coughed up his due ante and then said, "Hey, Westley, just what is your sexual preference anyway?"

Quick as a flash, the girl took off her shoe and whipped it at the guy's head. He dodged it, but only barely. Both her arm and her aim were impressive. "What's yours, jerk-face?"

Everyone laughed, even the girl. Even me. It was really quite something to watch. *She* was something.

After a minute they all settled down and one of them said, "So what's up? Are you grounded now or what?"

"Don't know. It was really weird. When my mom picked me up from school I got a stern talking to, but then the travel agent called about her cruise and she forgot all about punishing me. She just dropped me off at home and went back to work."

"Sweet. Then get down here and let's go. It'll probably be your last chance to get in a game before we leave for the summer because your butt is toast when your mom gets home and realized she forgot to lay down the law."

I wondered what kind of game they meant and I absolutely loathed them for taking her away. But that's what they did. She crawled back inside her house, and, without bothering to close her bedroom window, reappeared on her front porch and began lacing up a pair of in-line skates.

Before she could leave, a car came to a screeching halt in her driveway, making her friends scatter like bowling pins. "Ellie!" a petite blond in a short skirt called as she waved goodbye to the carful of girls who'd dropped her off.

Ellie. Her name was Ellie. Ellie Westley. It was such a cutesy name, but I still liked it. It softened her up somehow.

The blond continued to complain loudly as she forced her way past Ellie's friends to the front door. "Can you please not let your band of losers loiter where people can see them? It's humiliating. And did you really punch Gabby Reese in the face? If I lose my junior prom court nomination because of you I will seriously kill you."

I laughed for several reasons. First, because of the look Ellie gave

her friends behind her sister's back. And, second, because, for the life of me, I couldn't understand how these two girls could possibly be related. Or, maybe, more accurately, how they'd survived this long without killing one another. Living across the street from them would never be boring, that was certain.

"Bite me, Angela," Ellie said. "I only hit her because she called you a boyfriend-stealing cheerleader wannabe who probably paid people to nominate you for junior prom princess. I was defending your honor. I swear."

Angela shrieked, believing the lie, and dashed into the house. No doubt to call her girlfriends for moral support and do damage control.

Ellie and her friends didn't wait until she was gone to fall to the ground laughing. They were still trying to get a hold of themselves when my aunt and the real estate lady came walking back up to the house. They eyed Ellie and her friends curiously, and Ellie watched them right back, the interest evident on her face too.

I could tell Ellie was wondering about who might move in to the house across the street from her, and consequently into her life. Without having to consider it, I knew the answer. Me.

I was going to move into this house. I was going to plunk my bed right down beneath this very window. Then I was going to make Aunt Janice live in this crap-hole city until Ellie was ready to move to California with me.

I went downstairs to meet my aunt, hoping to get a better look at Ellie and maybe see what her reaction to me was, but she was already gone when I got outside, skating away down the street with her friends. She never looked back.

"So, is this the one? Can we stop looking?" Aunt Janice asked when she saw me.

I looked back at the house and then glanced up at Ellie's open window. This was definitely the one. I nodded. "We have a winner."

BONUS MATERIAL

CHAPTER ONE FROM SETH'S POV

The day I finally met Ellie started out like every day since I'd moved to Michigan—with me chugging down a glass of wheatgrass juice across the table from my Aunt Janice while she tried yet again to convince me to move my gym equipment into the basement.

"I think it's already eighty-five degrees outside," she complained. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather move your stuff into the basement? It's cooler down there."

We'd had variations of this conversation six days in a row now. "There's no real light down there. I'm a southern California boy, born and bred. I need sunshine." A true statement, though not the reason I did my workouts in the garage. I was hoping Ellie would notice me and come say hi. I wasn't going to admit that to my aunt, though. "Besides, eighty-five isn't that hot."

"It is when you combine it with ninety percent humidity," Aunt Janice groaned.

She was working on her latest manuscript at the kitchen table because she claimed it was too hot in her office. She had two fans pointing directly at her and a squirt bottle set to mist that she occasionally sprayed herself with. She'd also given up her morning coffee for iced lattes and had converted her lucky writing sweats into a pair of cutoff shorts.

"Why couldn't you have picked a house with air conditioning?"

I shrugged. "You wanted this move to feel authentic. None of the houses in this neighborhood have air conditioning."

Aunt Janice took her glasses off and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "You're right," she said with a sigh. "This insanity was my idea. And it *is* good for us to experience. We're very spoiled, you and I, aren't we?"

"Speak for yourself," I teased, even though we both knew she was right. "Have you heard me complain even once since we moved here?"

"No." Aunt Janice smiled affectionately. "You're such a good kid, Seth. I don't deserve you. Thank you for coming here with me, and thank you for having a positive attitude."

Really she was giving me too much credit. If it weren't for Ellie I'd have done nothing but complain about this hellish state twenty-four, seven. Of course, it'd be better if Ellie would actually talk to me.

An entire week I'd been here, and I don't think Ellie even realized I existed. Either that, or she didn't care that I did. That was a depressing thought, so I chose to believe she was just off in her own

world. If only I knew how to extend that world to include me.

Normally I'd have been happy to go talk to her first, but somehow I didn't think that would fly with her. She struck me as the type who had to do things on her own terms. As far as I could tell, if I hit on her I was likely to get punched. I couldn't go over there and ask her out, no matter how much I wanted to.

Plus, there's no way I'd even get to her. That sister of hers would glom onto me the second I stepped foot on their porch. I'd seen probably a dozen different guys come and go from their house this week and while Angela flirted with them all, she still watched me like a hungry animal.

I wish Ellie looked at me with the amount of lust her sister does. Hell, I wish she looked at me in general.

The thought of Ellie already being in a relationship crossed my mind. I'd dismissed it after watching her with those guys the first time I saw her, but maybe I was wrong. My hands clench into fists at the thought of Ellie's boyfriend. I hated the guy more than I'd ever hated anyone, and I didn't even know if he existed yet.

Aunt Janice pulled me from my nightmarish thoughts with another sigh. "I still worry about you overdoing it. Make sure you drink lots of water. Don't overheat."

"I'm not a car, Aunt Janice," I said.

I kissed the top of her head, then headed outside, praying today would be the day that Ellie and I would finally speak.

It wasn't. At least, not then. I did my workout as normal with no interruptions. Ellie was nowhere to be seen.

Angela checked the mail twice.

Aunt Janice was right about the heat. No matter how much water I guzzled during my workout I was still dying of thirst. I grabbed another ice-cold bottle from the fridge before hitting the shower. As I drank, I glanced out my bedroom window at the house across the street.

Ellie's bedroom was directly across from mine. She had a tendency to leave her window open with the shade all the way up, and that habit, I hate to say, was turning me into some kind of stalker. I'd even broken down and found my binoculars. I couldn't not look. A person's room says so much about them, and I needed to know everything I could about Ellie if I was going to make her mine.

I didn't notice Ellie until I'd emptied my water bottle. She was standing in her window looking right at me. Our gazes met and a rush of adrenaline surged my veins. It was the first time we'd made eye contact. But as quickly as we'd noticed each other, she ducked out of sight.

She scrambled away like she was embarrassed. It was almost like

she thought I'd caught her staring at me and not the other way around. Hope sprang inside me. *Had* I caught her staring? Was it possible she watched me the way I did her?

I waited. I had to know if she'd look again. *Come on, Ellie. Look again. Look at me*. I willed it to happen. Even just a tiny peek and I'd be able to tell something of her thoughts. I'm extremely good at reading people.

Sure enough, Ellie slowly stepped back into view. She was far enough away that I couldn't read the expression on her face, but I could tell she was startled to see me still standing there. I could tell she was embarrassed. It was enough. Whether she'd been watching me, or just happened to notice me, she'd taken a minute to check me out. I was sure of it. And judging from the level of discomfort she displayed, she liked what she saw. She may have even had a few dirty thoughts. I hoped so. It'd make us a little more even.

I wasn't sure how someone could have such an effect on me, but my entire body felt alive with reckless energy just knowing that she was looking at me. That she was thinking about me at that very moment. I liked that—liked it too much, maybe.

I thought she'd duck away again but she surprised me and waved as if embracing her guilt. It was sheepish and defiant at the same time—as though she felt shy for the first time in her life and didn't quite know how to handle it.

The idea that I could make a confident girl like Ellie feel shy was so hot that I couldn't return her wave. It was too casual a gesture for the kinds of thoughts I was entertaining right then.

Our moment was over too quickly. Something or someone startled her so badly she practically jumped out of her skin. Considering her parents both worked, I knew who that someone probably was.

With our moment officially over, I went to get ready for my day, trying to come up with a good way to approach her. Because I couldn't wait for her to come to me anymore. Not after that. Not now that I knew she'd noticed me. Today was the day. One way or another, I was going to talk to the girl of my dreams.

It didn't happen like I expected. It was only about forty-five minutes after I'd seen Ellie in her window. I'd managed to shower and do my hair, but getting dressed had been trickier. I didn't know what kinds of guys Ellie liked and I absolutely didn't want to make the wrong impression.

It was clear that I was her sister Angela's type, and I was pretty sure that in Ellie's opinion that would count as a strike against me. I needed something that might suggest there was more to me than good looks and a nice car. Jeans were obviously a given, but I didn't own a

sports jersey of any kind—Ellie's standard attire—so I figured since we had the same taste in music, a t-shirt of my favorite local LA band would be good. It could be a good conversation starter.

I'd just splashed on a little cologne when I heard what I'd come to recognize as the sound of skates jumping the curb. I wandered over to my window and sure enough, Ellie was standing on her driveway looking like she'd just come back from a good, long workout.

This was perfect. She had no car, and an obvious weakness for ice cream, and she was currently dying of the heat. I was betting that if I went down there and asked her if there was some great local ice-cream place nearby she wouldn't be able to turn me down, even if she wasn't interested in me.

She took off her helmet and wiped at the sweat on her brow—a gesture I found unreasonably endearing—but then she looked up startled. She threw her hands out in front of her and yelled, "Bruno, no! Stay! Bad dog!"

The dog was big and looked fierce. He had clipped ears and a stub for a tail like a pit bull. I'm no dog expert, but this couldn't be good. I'd learned about dog attacks when working with a K-9 unit once in Los Angeles. After watching what those police dogs could do to a full-grown man, I stay clear of them. But I wasn't about to let one eat my future girlfriend.

I didn't even think, really. I just reacted on instinct. I grabbed my Taser, which I always keep on hand since Aunt Janice won't let me carry a gun, and ran downstairs. By the time I came flying out the front door, Ellie was on the ground unconscious and the dog was on top of her. The thing went for her face and I didn't hesitate. I stunned that dog into next Tuesday.

The dog yelped and fell to the ground, but he'd be fine eventually. I was more worried about Ellie. There was a decent sized pool of blood staining her driveway. She'd cracked her head open pretty hard, but on the bright side she was already awake.

Her gaze looked a little rattled still, but when she noticed me hunched over her she was able to focus her eyes on me. Such a pretty hazel. More green than brown, with tiny flecks of gold in them. They were beautiful eyes. I couldn't believe I was finally getting to stare into them.

"Hi Ellie," I said. "It's nice to meet you."

I couldn't keep the smile off my face. This was so not the way I'd imagined introducing myself to her, and yet, somehow, it seemed appropriate that our first meeting involved weapons and a lot of blood.

Ellie apparently didn't appreciate the unusual circumstances of our meeting, because she shrieked like a banshee. She must have been

confused from the bonk on the head because she looked up at me with sheer panic in her eyes and immediately began pushing me away.

"Easy there, Ellie," I said, trying to sound calm. She was going to hurt herself even more if she didn't lie still. There was a lot of blood and I needed to stop it. The only thing I had was my shirt—ironic considering how long I'd taken to pick it out.

With a sigh I yanked it over my head and pressed it to her wound. She screamed again, but after a moment she seemed to understand a little better what was happening and began to calm down. Once the fear had subsided, she groaned. I couldn't blame her. She probably had a killer of a headache and all that screaming couldn't have helped anything.

"Ellie! What the freak is with the screaming? I'm on the phone!"

I'd forgotten about the older sister. I was really hoping to get to know Ellie a little before I had to interact with the vulture, but I supposed in this situation it couldn't be helped.

I suppressed a sigh as Angela approached. She screamed a blood-curdling scream that sounded nearly identical to Ellie. I guess they were related after all.

"Don't worry, she'll be all right," I assured Angela. "But she's going to need stitches."

"They're blue," Ellie said suddenly. "Deep, dark, ocean blue." I had no clue what she was talking about until she added, "Gorgeous, just like the rest of him."

I nearly laughed outright. Not that I wasn't equal parts thrilled and relieved to know that she was as attracted to me as I was to her, but this was hardly the time to flirt. She must have hit her head hard.

I waved my finger in front of her face and she moaned like she was about to throw up. "She may have a concussion, too," I said to her sister. "We should get her to a hospital. Are your parents home?"

Angela had been staring at the blood on the ground, but snapped out of her trance at the sound of my voice. She finally came rushing over beside me. "They're both at work!" she cried, nearly hysterical.

"Obvious much, Ang?" Ellie asked. I followed Ellie's gaze to where her sister was ever-so-delicately clinging to me. This time I did laugh. Out loud. Even in her concussed state she managed a disgusted smirk.

The sisters glared at one another for a moment, but then Ellie's focus slipped and she started blinking. She needed medical attention. I plastered Angela's hand to the shirt against Ellie's head. "Hold this," I said. I hoped she'd be able to follow at least that much instruction until I came back. I had my doubts, though, so I hurried just in case.

I burst through my front door moments later with the unconscious dog in my arms and my aunt jumped up from the table. "Seth? What on *Earth*—"

"It's a dog. I tased it. It attacked the girl across the street."

"It attacked…" My aunt's voice trailed off, horrified. She ran to open the back door for me. "Is she all right?"

"It didn't bite her," I assured her as I laid the dog on the back porch. "But she hit her head. I think she has a concussion." I ran into the laundry room and grabbed the first shirt I could find. "The dog has a collar. Could you call its owner while I drive the girl to the hospital?"

"Of course." Aunt Janice followed me to the front door. "Do you need help getting her there?"

"Her sister's outside. We should be fine."

"Okay. I'll call the girl's parents. Her mother gave me her phone number when we moved in. Which sister was it?"

"The redhead."

Aunt Janice nodded as if unsurprised. "She's an interesting one, isn't she?"

I didn't realize I was grinning until Aunt Janice gave me a sly look. "Of course," she said with a playful sigh. "The redhead. I should have known." She looked around the hideous, non-air conditioned house. "It all makes sense now."

"Goodbye, Aunt Janice!"

Outside, Angela actually had managed to keep pressure on her sister's head. "You know where there's a hospital?" I asked, giving her my keys.

"Uh, just a mile or two from here."

"Good. I'll get her. You drive."

Carefully, I scooped Ellie into my arms. All I can say is it's a good thing I work out. Ellie must be made of all muscle. I could feel how skinny she was beneath her baggy clothes, but she was far from a lightweight. Suddenly, however inappropriate it may have been at the time, I was imagining what it would be like to get into a good wrestling match with her. I would *love* to try it.

I was snapped from my daydream by another scream. "There's so much blood!"

I glanced back at the driveway. It wasn't as bad as I'd originally thought. "I've seen a lot worse."

"You've seen worse?"

"She's got plenty left. Trust me. Can you open the door for me?"

As I climbed in the car Angela asked, "Doesn't blood stain? You're going to get it all over your car."

Instantly, an image from my nightmares flashed in my mind. "Wouldn't be the first time," I muttered.

I tried to push away the memory as I crawled in the back and carefully adjusted Ellie in my lap. I pushed the shirt to the back of her head again and tried to ignore the blood. This was not the same

situation, and this was definitely not the time to have a panic attack.

"W-what d-do you mean not the first time?" Ellie whispered.

She sounded weak. Tired. But she nuzzled her face against my chest and my years-ago accident was forgotten. "Shh," I said, giving her a wink I hoped she found comforting. Then I snapped, "Just hurry, okay?" to Angela, who had yet to move the car.

When we turned the corner out of our neighborhood onto the main road Ellie groaned and her eyes rolled in back of her head. "Ellie," I whispered, giving her a gentle shake. She didn't wake up, so I slapped her cheek with just enough force to wake her up. If there was one thing I knew about head injuries, it was that you weren't supposed to go to sleep if you had one. "Oh, no you don't," I said, smiling from relief when she opened her eyes. "No falling asleep."

"Can't help it," she murmured, melting like butter against me. "I'm so tired and you're so comfortable."

She fit so perfectly against me that it was almost as if she were made for me. If I weren't worried about her physical well-being I could have held her like that forever. As it was, even bleeding all over me, I wouldn't have given back this moment for anything. I fought a shudder and pulled her tighter against me.

Ellie released a contented sigh against my chest. "For someone with such hard-looking muscles, the new kid is surprisingly soft."

I laughed. I was sure Ellie wasn't fully aware of the words coming out of her mouth. Clearly, the part of her brain that she'd rattled was the part that filtered her thoughts before she spoke them.

"Something funny?" she asked, and I almost had to laugh again.

"You are."

And she was. I appreciated this rare glimpse into her unguarded mind, almost as much as I was going to enjoy it when she remembered this moment after she felt better. *Oh, Ellie*, I thought as I stared down at her. *You are going to be so much fun*.

I couldn't help myself. I brushed my fingers along her cheek. She was so soft. So perfect. In that moment it was just me and Ellie. Everything else had faded away. She shuddered beneath my touch in a way that gave me goose bumps, and then looked up at me with a lazy smile. "Such shiny, bright, red hair," I whispered as I tucked a fallen strand of it behind her ear. "Gorgeous, just like the rest of you."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Kelly Oram wrote her first novel at age fifteen—a fan fiction about her favorite music group, The Backstreet Boys, for which her family and friends still tease her. She's obsessed with reading, talks way too much, and likes to eat frosting by the spoonful. She lives outside of Phoenix, Arizona with her husband and four children. Learn more at www.kellyoram.com or follow her on twitter! www.twitter.com/kellyoram